



CHEMISTRY

BOOK 01

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Chemistry

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Synopsis

A pill, a tiny capsule encased in a biologically harmless water-soluble shell; A shell whose very existence is a result of a century of research and technological advancement. A manmade synthesis of Chemicals and product of complex processes.

And in the end, a means to an end.

A way to deliver a concoction of other Chemicals for an agenda; Vitamins for nutrition, medication for treatment, or... perhaps more.

We trust that what we eat won't do us harm, and trust that those who are responsible for its creation had the best of intentions. But in the end, it is difficult or perhaps impossible to truly tell what lies within a pill.

That is until one day I entered a research institution as a test subject. All I did was swallow a pill I was told to be a health supplement.

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Prologue

Chemistry is Everywhere.

How trees grow, how snowflakes form, how fireworks burn – all these interactions are like laboratories with chemical reactions in progress.

If you hear something along these lines, most people will probably feel the same way.

What good is in knowing all this?

These are phenomena you can see time and again in your daily life and aren't of much concern.

Initially, I thought the same...

Before a single pill turned my life upside down.

Chapter 1 – One In Ten Thousand (1)

AN General Hospital main building.

Anxiety filled the eyes of the young man who just got off the taxi. He took out his phone at the hospital's entrance then carefully looked over the text message he received this morning once again.

[KG Chemical Health Supplement Phase 1 Clinical Trial:
December 9th-10th, 4th Floor Pharmaceutical Supply Center]

Afterwards, the young man took a deep breath, thrust his shoulders back, and entered with a gusto.

That was three seconds ago.

The pupils of the young man who crossed the automatic doors started shaking slightly as the smell of antiseptic characteristic to hospitals invaded his nose. He felt as if his heart shriveled in anxiety again.

‘Hey, Jungwu Han, you have nothing to be afraid of. This is a simple job where you get paid to take nutritional supplements.’

The receptionist, who met him in the lobby, stared at him with concern as if asking him if he was feeling uncomfortable. Jungwu formed a small smile on his face to show that he was fine and

crossed the hallway quickly to stand in front of the elevators.

While waiting on the elevator to come down from higher floors, Jungwu's gaze settled on the reflection that was on the gleaming elevator doors.

It was a strapping young man with dark brown pupils in his mid-twenties.

He was on the tall side without excess fat.

This was part of the criterion listed under recruitment notice for the clinical trials he wanted to participate in today. He saw the ad by chance while sniffing around job hunting sites. But the problem was with the additional requirements below.

[You have had experiences where you were in a coma for over a week.]

[You suffer insomnia and hypersomnia in turns.]

[You feel as if someone's striking up a conversation with you when you're alone.]

[You have experienced an overwhelming sense of déjà vu on multiple occasions.]

The requirement was, that among dozens of special conditions like this, you had to meet at least one. Maybe that's why he got more goosebumps than usual.

‘They can’t be selecting for mentally ill people. Besides, I’m ... ‘

Who knew that being hospitalized after a car crash could help him out in this way?

Ding dong.

As he got on the elevator, there was a man who shouted “Please hold up!” as he ran over. Jungwu was a little surprised, as his gaze naturally turned towards this person. The man had a similar physique to him and had a rather pale complexion. He was a man that fit the physical requirements of the recruitment notice.

The man looked at Jungwu and asked.

“Do you happen to be going to the clinical trials?”

“Huh? Oh, yes.”

“Phew. What a relief. This is the right place.”

The man must have been cold, as he placed both hands in his armpits and crunched up. With a side glance, he scanned Jungwu and asked.

“Is this your first time?”

“Come again?”

“First timers usually come in feeling intimidated. Clinical Trials. To be honest, it’s an unnerving set of words. You don’t know what some strangers, whose face you don’t even know, will do to your body.”

“Indeed.”

The man continued as if it was all a matter of fact.

“One time, I went into a clinical trial for high blood pressure medicine. They first fed us a diarrhea inducing medicine, and told us to get on a running machine and keep running. Apparently, they had to check blood pressure changes resulting from extreme stress forced on the body.”

“That... that sounds awful.”

“Nah, that’s not much. For erection inducing medication, they told us to masturbate as they randomly turned on porn...”

“Ma-Masturbate?”

“They said, “Shall I pull it out with a syringe? Or do you want to ejaculate yourself?” What are we supposed to say? If we asked the nurse to help, we’d probably get dragged off right to prison.”

“...!”

“Anyways, when you get around, there’s all kinds of weird things. But, all of this adds up to a decent wage.”

In other words, this man was like a specialist in clinical trials. Jungwu couldn’t tell if he meant to be encouraging or intimidating.

Ding dong.

At that moment, the elevator came to a halt, then opened its doors. As he stepped out into the hallway, he saw five to six other participants standing there.

‘There’s lots of people who are just as nervous as I am.’

Jungwu took a spot among those waiting with a frozen demeanor and started waiting for the clinical trials that begin momentarily.

“Jungwu Han?”

“Here.”

The room he got called into was like a scientific lab with various medical equipment that he couldn’t even name. The numerous people in white gowns caught his attention.

One woman approached Jungwu, who was looking around.

“I am KG Chemical’s Senior Researcher Chae-un Moon. Call me Dr. Moon.”

She had her hair tied up neatly and the voice to match her appearance.

“First, come this way.”

Jungwu followed her for a bit and was surprised that there was such a beautiful researcher in a place like this.

“The test will proceed here.”

On the table that Dr. Moon pointed to, was a syringe and an ampoule the size of a finger, code named ‘AF-12’.

Jungwu was confused for a moment.

“I’m getting an injection instead of ingesting something? Wasn’t this a health supplement?”

Dr. Moon coldly answered Jungwu, who asked in confusion.

“The method of administration is written on the terms. You are

the one that signed the agreement, correct?”

The information on the dozens of pages mostly went over his head. He read it all, but he couldn't remember most of all the technical terms because he couldn't understand them. Dr. Moon continued briskly with a business-like attitude as other participants were also surprised like Jungwu.

“The methods are different for each volunteer. We need to vary the administration of the drug to gauge its effectiveness in the body. Cream, patch, liquid ingestion, aerosol, suppository... .”

‘Suppository?’

He was very satisfied with the injection.

Dr. Moon picked out the blood pressure monitor among the medical equipment then placed it on the table.

“I will start with some basic tests. We have to make sure that the side effects aren't resulting from some other illnesses.”

“Side effects...?”

At the moment, Dr. Moon had an expression on her face that said, ‘this isn't a million won job for nothing’.

Afterwards, a scene that was familiar even to Jungwu unfolded.

Blood pressure and ECG checks, measuring height, weight, and other physical features were not very different from the physical exams he regularly had in school.

30 minutes later.

“Current time is 16:05. Administering diluted solution AF-12 to volunteer Jungwu Han starts now.”

Dr. Moon brought the syringe to Jungwu’s arm.

As he felt the sting, Jungwu watched the 0.1 mg of liquid disappear into his arm.

“It’s done.”

“Already?”

Maybe due to the small dose, it was simpler than even getting a flu vaccine.

“Please standby in room 407. We have to monitor you for 12 hours to observe the progress so please refrain from excessive movements.”

Jungwu nodded as he rubbed the alcohol soaked cotton on his arm.

As he went out the door, the specialist in clinical trials recognized him and approached him.

“How was it in there?”

“It wasn’t much.”

“Right?”

Jungwu saw a pointy pill form of AF-12 prepared on the table and flinched. It was obvious that it was a shape designed to go into a certain hole.

“... F-Fighting.”

Other volunteers, who had been given the drug before Jungwu, were leisurely taking up space in Room 407.

After he met some of their gazes, he found himself an empty bed.

‘That wasn’t much.’

He felt all the pent up energy from being so nervous about the clinical trial leaving him, given how shamefully uneventful the process was. He was almost sorry about taking a million won after spending his time peacefully like this.

A moment later.

As he was spending his free time, a man walked in awkwardly as if something was stuck in his crotch but he didn't look all that uncomfortable.

“Hey~ Jungwu Han ssi!”

He started chatting as he sat on the bed next to Jungwu as if it were a matter of course.

“Dr. Moon is no joke, right?”

“Yes, she's rather stiff. It's almost to the point of being a little scary.”

“No, isn't she really pretty? I thought I was gonna melt when she was rubbing the salve on me~.”

Jungwu just scratched his chin as he watched the man gesturing the rubbing motion on his own arm. I get it. I won't comment further on this.

He was quietly nodding, but the man went into chatterbox mode.

“I asked the nurse earlier a little about Dr. Moon, and she said that she was a medical practitioner. My goodness, there's such a woman. Pretty and studious. In the future, I have to volunteer in

this company's clinical trials no matter what. Who knows? Maybe I can get her number.”

“Would she feel attracted to a man who comes to these part-time jobs?”

“Ku. You're hitting where it hurts. You're more realistic than you look, Jungwu. Still, since there is a goddess like that, shouldn't we keep volunteering for KG Chemical's clinical trials?”

Maybe if Jungwu were a clinical trials specialist like this man, he could see himself enjoying tests with a beauty like Dr. Moon.

‘If I did this one more time, my liver might just crumble completely.’

One by one, the people in the hospital room increased.

Time flew by and it was getting late as they had already finished the inadequately seasoned hospital meal for dinner. In that time, researchers with KG chemical's logo on their gowns came by occasionally to check blood pressure.

‘Huh?’

Jungwu turned his head from the smartphone that he was tapping on. All of a sudden the hospital room felt dead silent. Strangely enough, not only the man next to him but all of the other participants who were in the middle of their conversations

had their eyes closed.

When he looked at the time, it read 10 PM. It was time to sleep after all.

Jungwu also leaned his head against the pillow, thinking he will fall asleep soon.

‘Let’s sleep. They said to relax until tomorrow.’

Sleep did not come as easily as he had hoped.

It was 11 o’clock, then 12 o’clock, and he was still wide awake at 1 o’clock.

‘... This is strange. Is it because I’m not used to sleeping in this place?’

It was boring, but he was also a bit hungry. In addition, what worried him most was the eerie silence in the room. How can everyone be so quiet without even a single snore?

‘Whew’

He was tapping on his smartphone again as he killed time when the door opened all of a sudden.

Click.

Maybe it was because it was too quiet in the room, but Jungwu unconsciously brought his phone to his chest and held his breath. He didn't want a cut to his pay from getting found out that he was the only one not sleeping and not following the directions to relax.

Two men in white gowns opened the door and entered.

“All of them are out like lights.”

“Isn't this almost to the extent of being comatose?”

“Every time I go into the room at this stage, it feels like I'm looking at the results of some mass suicide. It's creepy.”

Jungwu's ears couldn't help but listen to this conversation intently.

“Anyways, this is a failure too, isn't it?”

“Yup. Dr. Moon will be disappointed again.”

“Isn't there something wrong with the medicine? I mean we're fine with getting paid without doing much. But still.”

Ggoruruk (stomach growl)

The hungry stomach sent its signal.

“Huh? Did you hear that noise?”

“Where is it?”

Feeling that it was inevitable that the two men, who were now looking around, would find him, Jungwu raised his hand.

“Excuse me.”

He noticed that they were surprised when he got up.

“Can I go to the convenience store to get some cup ramen? I’m too hungry to sleep.”

While he grinned widely as he rubbed his belly, the two men’s faces changed as they ran off screaming.

‘Why are they so surprised?’

What was even scarier than that, was that none of the other participants in the room even reacted to the loud noises coming from the men who screamed and ran out.

Jungwu felt goosebumps all over. He went over to the clinical

trials specialist next to him.

“Hey there.”

He shook his shoulder slightly but the man was in a deep sleep, and it didn't look like he would be able to wake up anytime soon.

All of a sudden, he felt very uncomfortable.

Clinical trials with strangely high remuneration. Illegal procedures. Side effects. Maybe they were trying to harvest organs from comatose patients and sell it on the black market...

All kinds of thoughts were going through his mind.

But then he heard sounds of running as if three to four deers were running down the hall. The two men, who had ran out earlier, came back with the beautiful researcher he met earlier in the day.

“Dr. Moon?”

“So, you really were awake.”

Dr. Moon stopped at the door as she looked straight at Jungwu, and swallowed some dried spit. She then turned to the men who came with her.

“You two can go back now. Good work.”

The men nodded silently and left. Dr. Moon approached Jungwu nonchalantly.

“Would you mind talking to me for a bit?”

“Why aren’t these people waking up?”

“They took sleeping drugs.”

“Huh?”

Jungwu looked at her as if he was asking, ‘then what about me?’. Dr. Moon spoke calmly.

“The protein cell that AF-12 is composed of has a powerful sleeping drug on one side and a chemical that contains special knowledge on the other.”

“What do you mean...”

“The reason for utilizing this dual structure is to target people like you. I honestly didn’t expect to find someone who would respond to the treatment this quickly. We estimated we would get one result out of ten thousand. In three months’ time, we haven’t gone through anywhere near that amount of people. I apologize for the poor reception earlier.”

Jungwu muttered as he still hadn't recovered from what she had said so unexpectedly.

"I'm sorry Doctor Moon, but I was in humanities."

"You didn't even take the general education courses?"

"... Should I have?"

Dr. Moon nodded, indicating that she gave a perfectly understandable explanation.

Jungwu felt a little depressed from that reaction.

"Now that I think about it, I'm starting to regret it a lot. Why didn't I, a Business Administration student go and audit some Pharmaceuticals related classes?"

"Molecular Biology."

"Exactly!"

As Jungwu growled, Dr. Moon looked frustrated in her own way. All of a sudden she opened up both of her hands before him.

"AF-12 is composed of two molecules that mirror each other. We

call this chirality, or optical isomers.”

She wiggled her fingers as if they were mirrored reflections of each other.

“The theory behind it is simple. Even though hands look similar, the left glove does not fit on the right hand. For these people, the sleep-inducing component took effect, and for you, the knowledge component became active.”

She continued as he wondered whether she was still speaking Korean.

“You don’t know what chirality is?”

“Forget chirality, I just wanna scream.”

“....”

His head hurt as she explained further.

“So why did you make some people sleep while making me stay awake?”

“You know the answer to that better than I do. Doesn’t anything come to mind?”

“This woman, really!”

He was being serious, but Dr. Moon’s no-big-deal attitude made his patience run out.

“Are you toying with people? Okay, let’s say there was a sleep inducing component in my injection. Optical isomer? A knowledge-transference chemical? Come on, does this even make sense? Recording information on a molecular level has to use techniques that are on the level of the Genome Project. Not to mention, understanding genetically coded knowledge by translating it back from gene into coherent words without using some kind of bases-to-language-analyzer in your head is simply impossible.”

“Normally, it would be impossible.”

“Yeah, it’s impossible. As you know, genetic code has to be transcribed into RNA first then get translated into amino acid chains. If something goes wrong during transfer, RNA’s intricate molecular recognition process in grabbing its amino acid...”

Jungwu stopped.

“... Why is this stuff coming out naturally out of my mouth!”

Chapter 2 – One In Ten Thousand (2)

Jungwu's eyes widened as he realized that suddenly, he had knowledge on subjects he never learned.

Jungwu looked dumbfoundedly at Dr. Moon, whose expression seemed to say – Now do you get it? He then looked down on his arm where he received the injection and suddenly, felt shivers go throughout his entire body.

“What is this...”

Jungwu never listened in on any lectures related to chemistry before, but it was as if his brain was linked to a science database.

Technical knowledge was constantly riding on his nerves and being transferred automatically.

“What have you done to me?”

“It's exactly as you see.”

Dr. Moon had a thin smile on her face after she confirmed the results from Jungwu.

“Are you telling me it's possible to transfer knowledge to another person with a simple injection?”

“That’s not exactly it, but the concept is similar.”

What is this crazy talk? Jungwu snorted in disbelief, but he couldn’t refute the fact of what he’d just experienced..

“The knowledge you have just drawn on is just an insignificant portion. This is stuff that anyone can gain from reading a book in a bookstore.”

Dr. Moon pointed outside.

“Shall we take this conversation to the reception room over some tea?”

AN Hospital’s VIP-Only lounge.

Dr. Moon placed a briefcase on the table and took out a bottle from within. She opened the lid then placed a pill on the table.

Jungwu looked at the blue jelly lump, coated in a transparent capsule, curiously.

“What is this?”

“You could say that this is the original version of the [AF-12](#) that you’ve been injected with. This can supply knowledge much more safely than the diluted solution. Of course, it is nutritionally excellent too.”

Code: AF-12

Case: Chemist's Insight

Research: When administered, the brain's neurons are reconfigured via the DNA of an esteemed professional in molecular biology. Knowledge and sensories are largely affected.

Jungwu's face changed as he thought about the purpose of this blue pill.

The recruitment ad was looking for a particular kind of person. This was no ordinary clinical trial.

"So? What are you trying to do by feeding me this dangerous pill? H-Human experiments? Maybe... dissection?"

"What do you mean it's dangerous? AF-12 is 100% safe. If you are concerned about a possible side effect, we will include compensation via our lawyers for any damages incurred as a result of side effects."

"Compensation or not, I'm not the kind of person who can take this kind of bone-chilling experiment lightly..."

"We want to hire Mr. Jungwu."

"... Excuse me?"

Did I hear that right?

“Please join KG Chemical, Mr. Jungwu Han.”

Jungwu was desperate to leap out of the lounge at any moment, until he heard this magical proposal that melted him on the spot.

“This clinical trial was conducted with the purpose of finding a researcher that could help with this research project for KG Chemical. Your wage is noted in the contract, so do check it out. However, you are going to start out as an intern. There are no openings to fill up, and this is considering how Mr. Jungwu Han’s past experiences don’t match with this line of work.”

Hire. Join company. Wage.

For someone who had just graduated from college last year, it was impossible for these words to not make Jungwu’s heart flutter.

Although he had spent the year applying for job interviews, Jungwu still hadn’t overcome the big wall called employment.

To be honest, wasn’t this also one of many part-time jobs that he had sought out in the daily war for employment; to alleviate a little of his mother’s burdens?

Jungwu started thinking faster than he had ever thought before.

Typically, in negotiations, the one with the knife in hand has the initiative. It was an employment offer from a big corporation like KG Chemical, but a contracted hire had no meaning outside of getting some experience. Jungwu spoke without looking at the contract documents that Dr. Moon had placed before him.

“Contract work? Then what about my future? Do you think I have all the time in the world to do everything you tell me to?”

To be honest, if he didn’t get employed in the next employment season, he would have plenty of time on his hands.

As he maintained his poker face with the ‘I’m busy’ attitude, he saw Dr. Moon bite her lips as she pondered over her answer. Jungwu awaited her response, wondering whether he came out too aggressively.

“Of course, this was an offer made without considering Mr. Jungwu Han’s circumstances. It seems like there’s no choice.”

‘Did I go too far?’

“We’ll add 20% in addition to the wage listed. This is the absolute best we can offer. What we need is a unique individual who can absorb AF-12. And you just proved that you could. Therefore you need to keep this in mind. If you decide to get out of this early because you couldn’t adjust to the particulars of the job, our lawyers will hold you liable for the damages, including the costs for restarting the clinical trials, after halting midway.”

Jungwu's mind was more occupied with the 20% increase to his wage than the part where things could be hard for him. His gaze went over to the contract.

“We haven't come to an agreement yet but...”

Jungwu had to swallow the saliva in his mouth when he saw the listed wage.

100 million won.

‘Didn't you say to come in as an intern!’

The offered wage was a hundred million won.

If you include the additional 20%, he was getting a staggering pay of 10 million won per month.

This was not the kind of money a new hire at a company would receive. No matter what chemical knowledge he was able to receive through that pill, just why? If it's a major corporation like KG Chemical, wouldn't there be plenty of professors interested in employment?

“About this blue pill – what do you mean when you say that this is a safe knowledge supplier?”

“Will you understand it if I put it into words?”

Dr. Moon held the blue pill in her hands then brought it before him.

Jungwu was in a dilemma as she offered the pill to him.

‘Do I take this or not?’

His eyes went over the wage clause on the contract.

Neither danger nor goosebumps held power in the face of money. Just like that, Jungwu took the blue pill.

He swallowed it without water.

10 seconds passed when a sudden heat spread down to his stomach.

“Hut.”

He tried to endure, but the heat coursing through his stomach made Jungwu’s heart sink.

“What’s happening? I feel like I swallowed boiling water.”

“It’s a simple heat reaction from the absorption process of the drug, so don’t be alarmed.”

He could feel each molecule from the capsule finding its way and scattering throughout his body using his nervous system. It was not only new, but also a strange experience.

At some point, he could no longer feel the continuous heat in his belly.

“How do you feel?”

Dr. Moon asked him unfazed.

‘Does this look like I got energized from some kind of Invigorant?’

DNA molecules, containing specialized knowledge, were spread throughout his body. A chemical network web had also been formed at the cellular level throughout his body.

He couldn’t understand himself as he was objectively analyzing this phenomenon, but at the same time, he found it fascinating.

“I’m not sure. I feel like I can grasp some knowledge I haven’t had before, but most importantly...”

Jungwu saw a strange scene before him as he replied. It was as if a microscope with a high resolution was placed before his eyes; he felt Dr. Moon’s cheek grow closer at an alarming rate. He felt like

he would get sucked in if he were to stare into her deep, clear eyes.

Jungwu thought he was hallucinating, so he rubbed his eyes and tried to refocus, but he had to stop himself from yelling. Instead of getting better, he could see her skin with even greater detail.

This was not a phenomenon that could be explained by having a good eyesight. Jungwu tried to rationalize this as an optical illusion.

‘What?’

But this was only the beginning.

He was zooming in as if he was getting sucked into her skin, but now it felt like he was staring at a huge TV screen that took up all of his vision. When it reached about the size of a movie screen, he was captivated by the marvel of it all.

He was looking at the sky of the vast land called the skin.

Something there was shining like a star.

Lost in thought, he was wondering if this shiny thing was the nucleus of some atom, he even started to forget that this was a strange phenomenon caused by AF-12.

‘Did the first astronaut to reach the space beyond the skies feel

this way?’

Meanwhile, Dr. Moon placed a different document before him.

“These are the terms on security matters. Read this slowly and carefully. When you’ve finished, I will go over what you must absolutely adhere to.”

He approached Dr. Moon.

In doing so, he felt as if her skin had become a much more vast space.

“Jungwu Han?”

On the star that was shining above her skin, an overlay hovered over it with the word [FE]. Next to it the element of oxygen, [O], flew closer and closer until it formed a stable orbit with the Iron.

Elemental star. He should probably call it that.

“... Jungwu Han. What’s wrong? Is there something on my cheek?”

Dr. Moon tilted her head as she noticed Jungwu staring straight at her.

Waking up from his trance, he saw the scene of that molecular world overlap reality in a half-transparent layer.

“Um.”

Jungwu came to his sense then replied hurriedly.

“I see something weird on Dr. Moon’s skin.”

“What do you see?”

“Fe, O ...”

“What did you say?”

Dr. Moon gave him a cold stare as if he had told her about a pimple.

“That is.”

The wondrous union of the two stars was only the beginning.

On her skin were a countless number of stars. These elemental stars had their own orbits and were adhering to a schedule.

“Fe and O’s orbits seem to make ferric oxide. Si and O seem to be together, so that’s silica? There are two C’s, 4 H’s and 3 O’s ...

glycolic acid?”

Jungwu started reading out the first combinations he could see. Dr. Moon made a strange expression as she heard his response.

“Aren’t these components of cosmetic products?”

“Cosmetics?”

While he was still in a daze from this space-like experience, the one thing he was sure about was that because of the shine on these elemental stars, Dr. Moon’s skin had the same light white tone as a result.

“I see. That’s the case.”

Chemical information laid over the contours of Dr. Moon’s face. He was able to read this information like he was reading traffic signs on the street.

“The ferric oxide and the silica are stuck right on the wrinkles next to your eyes and they’re shining. Wow, it really hides the curves so well.”

Dr. Moon’s face was dyed red with embarrassment, as Jungwu spoke about the chemical effect of the wrinkle prevention cream as if it weren’t a cosmetic.

“I did not put on any!”

“I can see it all plainly.”

“What do you mean you can see it? Don’t say weird things just because you can draw on knowledge you didn’t have before. Also, does Mr. Jungwu not understand the conditions of the skin of a woman who has been working overtime, during the weekend, for two days straight?”

One couldn’t tell from the outside whether she had put on some cosmetics or not. Dr. Moon was confident in her skills, but as she had been unexpectedly hit in her weak point, her brows started to quiver.

At this moment, Jungwu was preoccupied with the other world’s reaction instead of Dr. Moon’s.

“Again and again, this is really intriguing.”

Dr. Moon’s head tilted as she watched Jungwu mutter to himself.

“What are you seeing now?”

“I wonder. I think Dr. Moon would understand this better than me.”

“Not everyone can have AF-12 take effect as it has for Jungwu

Han-ssi.”

Jungwu was watching the glycolic acid softly wrap around the skin’s earth and spin in place as he asked a question to Dr. Moon.

“What exactly is the genetic knowledge contained in this drug?”

“You could say that it’s the personal knowledge of a molecular biologist.”

“Someone like Dr. Moon?”

“No. I’m not a chemist. Just a doctor doing some related work. However, the owner of that knowledge is quite an irregular chemist. He is very different from the average person.”

As she put it this way, he became even more curious.

“I’d like to meet whoever made this drug, someday. ”

“That won’t happen. Focus on the stipulated task and produce results, that is all. Make sure to verify your contract.”

“He’s not in the company?”

“I have no obligation to tell you about his circumstances. We don’t need Jungwu Han ssi to understand it either.”

Jungwu felt as if there was an invisible wall that prevented him from further inquiry, as she flatly rejected him in a business-like tone.

He turned his gaze away from her cheek that he'd been staring at and saw the spectacle of elemental stars disappear like snow melting in spring.

‘What should I call this? A Chemist’s Insight?’

Being able to see from the perspective of a molecular biologist was a new experience. His heart was palpitating loudly just because of this.

He couldn’t explain it, but he felt that he would be able to achieve something significant and surprising with little effort.

“Dr. Moon.”

“Yes?”

“Where should I sign?”

Jungwu held up the pen and signed on the first line he could see for signatures.

“Don’t you want to read it carefully?”

“I can take my time to look at it. Well, it’s not like this will be a slavery contract. No wait, Am I a slave already?”

“You acted like you had the heart of a little bird earlier.”

“That was then. Maybe I grew a backbone because of the drug?”

Jungwu decided to say a little more with the knowledge coming to his head since he had already held such an interest in Dr. Moon’s hidden wrinkles earlier.

“You can’t cover the problem of your skin getting rough with just a little bit of light. Wouldn’t there be a better solution that addresses the root cause? The ruined skin earth, ah, no. If you could add some catalyst to remove aging dead skin cells...”

Crunch.

Jungwu stopped at the sound of the crushing of the plastic pen’s lid.

“That’s enough.”

Smooth skin is a woman’s pride. Jungwu dryly coughed and turned his head as he felt an overwhelmingly intimidating gaze that he hadn’t felt before, directed at him from Dr. Moon.

The job offer letter, NDA, and the contract related, had several hundred clauses.

After checking over the documents that seemed to have no end, with the final signature left, Jungwu asked a question.

“When do I start?”

“We would prefer if you started as soon as possible.”

Jungwu’s gaze landed on a condition listed towards the end of the contract.

[This contract is effective the moment it is signed.]

There were many clauses that required you to go over them again to understand them fully, but the fact remained that if he signed it earlier, he would get his wage that much earlier.

“Can I start today??”

“That’s fine but... will you be okay?”

Dr. Moon gave a look asking if he wouldn’t be too tired. He thought that he couldn’t show a weak side to the woman before him, who had been working the night shifts as well as the last two

days in a row.

“Well, it’s Monday now, so it seems like a nice clean start.”

Jungwu coolly signed the last part of the contract then pushed it towards Dr. Moon.

“Should I show up by 9 o’clock?”

Dr. Moon looked at the signature carefully then placed it in the briefcase. She then spoke quietly.

“8 o’clock.”

“Sorry?”

Jungwu asked because he thought he heard wrongly.

“It’s already 5 o’clock, to return home then come back, it seems like there’s too little...”

“Have you seen an intern that works regular hours at a company? I was at a different company but when I was an intern, the concept of going home was weirder.”

Her reply was merciless.

Jungwu tried to assure himself that the change in her attitude was not just because this was now a signed and done deal.

“Before you’re late, let me give you a ride home.”

Dr. Moon got up after taking care of her matters like knifework.

Jungwu grabbed the heap of contractual documents and hurriedly followed after Dr. Moon.

Chapter 3 – A Certain Chemical Company's Intern's Day (1)

In the morning hours, before the sun has risen up.

A luxury passenger car left from AN hospital and drove through the tranquil riverside road.

Jungwu, sitting in the passenger seat, was looking at the car's interior decor with a slack-jawed expression.

‘Dr. Moon's tastes are rather ...’

Pink sheets, flower patterned handle cover, and cute characters that were bobbing their heads to the shaking of the car.

Jungwu glanced at Dr. Moon who was emitting an icy aura and turned his head away. Was a lack of humanity and femininity a discrete chemical reaction?

“Jungwu-ssi.”

Jungwu got a little nervous as Dr. Moon started a conversation.

“Due to being hired under special circumstances, the people there won't look upon you kindly. There are also going to be other individuals who will be curious of how and why you were hired.”

“I have no choice but to endure, right?”

“Nope.”

“By no, you mean...”

“You have to make them shut up with your skills. I believe Jungwu-ssi has the ability to do so.”

Even though she wasn't shouting, she was strangely coming off as energetic.

“Dr. Moon. I am asking because I didn't quite understand the non-disclosure agreement clause, but are the contents of this contract a secret within the company?”

“You must keep it a secret. Especially anything regarding AF-12.”

“Then what should I say when they ask how a business administration major graduate has the knowledge to put expert researchers to shame?”

“Just say that you learned from Seung-guk Chun.”

“Seung-guk Chun?”

“In KG Chemicals, that’s enough.”

It seemed like an important name, but Dr. Moon no longer spoke and focused on driving.

Jungwu naturally wondered if this person was the owner of the knowledge contained in the AF-12.

As their conversation came to an end, silence filled the car.

Not a minute had passed when

Rrrrring.

Jungwu’s phone bell broke the silence.

Jungwu saw ‘[Jisuk Hong Yeosa](#)’ on caller ID and pressed the button out of habit, then, pressed his phone to his ear.

Yeosa is a korean honorific used for a woman especially mothers. You might have noticed that Jungwu and his mother do not share the same surname, it is because women in korea keep their maiden name.

“Mom?”

“Jungwu. If you are not coming back, shouldn’t you at least leave a text message? Do you live alone in this place?”

“No, that is...”

“Nah, mom. If hyung is out and silent, that means he’s gotten drunk as hell, and he’s slept it off in some random place. It’s not like this has happened only once or twice before.”

He heard his brother chiming in on the side to incite his mother’s anger.

“Jungwu, did you drink... Hey, Jungchan. I told you to not drink water directly from the bottle like that!”

“Okay mom, just stop hitting my back!”

Jungwu looked at Dr. Moon for a moment, concerned that she would notice the loud noises from his phone.

“Mom, I’m heading home right now so let’s talk then.”

“Lookie here. Are you the only busy one around here? Stop pretending you’re busy. I’m going to the morning market before opening the restaurant, so take care of breakfast on your own.”

“Okay.”

“Also, take out the recyclable trash. There’s a heap of it on the yard.”

“I heard you.”

“Huh, you took a phone call so early in the morning. I thought you would have become a dog and be crawling after drinking all night”

“I didn’t!”

Blip.

The phone conversation ended.

Jungwu was bitter about being falsely accused of drinking irresponsibly.

Dr. Moon glanced sideways towards him with a look of inquiry.

“Th-That was a call from home. Don’t mind it. Haha.”

An awkward laugh leaked out of his mouth..

Even yesterday, he wasn’t able to explain that he was out to get some money by participating in some clinical trials. Mrs. Hong would not readily permit him to take part in unknown clinical trials, and he’d probably get scolded if he did try to explain.

‘I can’t say it for what it really is. For now, I’m going to say that I started working part-time.’

Dr. Moon’s car came to a stop in front of a mountainside village packed with villas and single family housing. Jungwu turned his head towards the driver’s seat and bowed in courtesy.

“Thank you for giving me a ride.”

“Jungwu-ssi.”

Dr. Moon pushed an envelope towards him.

“What is this?”

“It’s your compensation for participating in the clinical trials. I don’t think I will have the time to give it to you otherwise.”

“Ah.”

Zoom–

Dr. Moon drove away..

The events at the hospital seemed real only after counting the 20 sheets of 50,000 won inside the envelope.

‘This is probably for the best, right?’

The contract duration was 1 year. Jungwu had caught onto the implication that he could also get cut for not working up to expectations. Based on what he saw from Dr. Moon’s attitude during negotiations, he inferred that there had to be good reasons as to why the wage was so unusually high.

‘Let’s try to endure as long as it’s not something that would get me genuinely killed.’

As long as he did enough, his pay would accumulate over time. However, there wouldn’t be much left over after paying off loans for his education and the family restaurant. He also started to feel good about becoming a member of society who gets up in the morning to go to work.

Jungwu whistled as he walked up the hill road.

Ggirik.

As he pushed on the old, worn out door and stepped in, he was met with a yard the size of his palm.

It was the small two story house that he’s lived in for all of his life. In the small alleyway over the wall, he learned how to smoke his first cigarette from the neighborhood hyung, Baeksoo, and under the nearby three-way street lamp, he had his first kiss with Eunsil. They all moved away, so he didn’t know what they were up

to now.

Creak –

Just as he had started reminiscing, the cold wind blew and shook the door.

‘Uh-hu, gives me the chills. I should spray some WD on this.’

Jungwu then took little steps through the yard and opened the door to the house.

“Mom, I’m home.”

He peeked his head into the living room which had heaps of dried slices of radishes on some newspapers. His mother was nowhere to be seen. The light in the kitchen was out, so it looked like she had already left for the market.

“Hey Chan!”

His younger brother was also not in his room. He did say it was the start of a new semester today, so he must have left early.

“I earned some money through a part-time job, but I have no one to brag to.”

After he had gone in to check that no one was home, he felt a little lonely. Even though the house was small, living together and getting along with his family warmed his heart. As he was thinking of this, he spun around a chair in the kitchen and stopped when he noticed the training clothes hanging off of it.

“This brother of mine...”

Jungwu swallowed his anger.

Normally, he would chase down his younger brother on his way to school and slap him hard on the back, but it was time for him to change. Starting today, he was no longer an unemployed hyung pretending to look for work. He was now a respectable salaryman.

‘Salaryman.’

He grinned as he thought of getting ready for work.

Subway Line 1 on Monday morning was the definition of hell itself.

“Please wait! Excuse me!”

Jungwu was being swept away by the swarm of people that were getting off the train like water tides, but he eventually managed to push his way inside..

“Phew. If I was just a moment late, I would have missed it.”

He did get ready right away, but he ended up being a bit late as he had to hurriedly look for his suit and iron it.

‘If it’s this much, I shouldn’t be too conscious of how I look, right?’

It was a decent-quality suit that he had worn when he was job hunting. He used the subway train’s mirror as he patted down his suit. His gaze stopped on his sleeves.

“Oh, there’s still some dust on this.”

He thoroughly patted off the dust and grabbed the handle on the ceiling nearby without giving it much thought.

With a zap, he felt a jolt of static on his fingertips.

“Ouch.”

It hurt more because he was caught off guard. He had rubbed his hands over fabric in an environment which had become dry due to the constant hot air blowing out of the heater in the subway train.

Jungwu blew on his still-stinging hand.

‘Huh?’

His eyes opened wide as he looked at his fingertips. He was able to see the curves of his fingerprints clearly as if he had zoomed in on them with a high-power magnifying glass.

Countless stars enveloped in a half-transparent fog spun around in their own orbits on the surface of his hand. The soft light, emitted by innumerable stars, resembled an immature dust cloud.

‘What is this supposed to be, virtual reality?’

The stardust wanted to extend outwards, but lacking the means, it had no choice but to stay on his hand. As he grabbed onto the gold colored handles in the train again, the stardust that was desperately seeking freedom left his palm without remorse.

‘Go, just go. Don’t gather into a bunch and cause static shocks.’

The stardust that climbed up the handle scattered throughout the train’s inner surface. Just as they had gone, another group of stardust began to gather from the air and onto his hand.

‘Are these guys some kind of free spirits? They go anywhere they want.’

It wasn’t as if anyone was watching him, but the very idea of

conversing with free electrons made him feel like a crazy person.

This station is Jongno 3ga, Jongno 3ga.

The train stopped.

Jungwu stopped caring about them and cast his gaze outside.

Perhaps because this was a transfer station, the people poured out of the train with great vigor.

Jungwu leaned next to the door and gripped onto the handle so that he wouldn't get swept away by the passengers. Meanwhile, he noticed that masses of stardust were clustering here and there on the train.

A young man's hand, that had a cluster of free charges, seemed like it would cause a spark at any moment. One woman had a sweater that had free electrons dancing on it as if it would give a jolt with just a casual brush.

'Yikes.'

Jungwu juked here and there to avoid any potential sparks. Because of this, he ended up being pushed back all the way to the corridor connection of the train cars. He counted the number of stops before his destination to avoid missing his stop due to being stuck at the back.

‘8 stations? I can try to push through the crowd a little later then.’

He was reaching for the handle in the corner to balance himself in the shaking train when he noticed a clump of free electrons on the handle.

Jungwu snorted in disdain at the little bastards that were approaching his fingertips.

‘You think you’ll get me again? Hurry up and go away!’

Jungwu violently shook off the stardust that was amalgamating from when he brushed against other people. The electrons flew away from his hands and went deeper inside the car as if it was being sucked into a vacuum. Jungwu followed the strange flow of electrons with his eyes until his gaze fell onto the corridor connection of the train cars.

He first saw the white surface of some A4 papers, when a lady studying the A4 papers entered his vision. For a brief moment, Jungwu wasn’t able to rip his eyes away from her enchanting eyes which had shone over those papers. Although he could only clearly see her forehead and her eyelashes, her eyes shone enough for his heart to palpitate.

Chapter 4 – A Certain Chemical Company's Intern's Day (2)

‘Huh?’

The strange flow of stardust was converging on her clothes. Free electrons, from all corners, were pouring in and it even took the stardust that he had driven out earlier.

‘Woah, there’s way too much gathered.’

Ignorant of the imminent danger she was in, the woman was engrossed in her book. Based on the amount he was seeing, if she were to reach out for a handle, she would feel at least three times the static shock that he had experienced earlier.

Although the stardust wasn’t entirely his fault, he couldn’t help but feel responsible. Of course, it was not because this woman was stunningly beautiful.

‘Hmph. This is DEFCON Level 1 of the static electricity world. Yup, this is very dangerous.’

Jungwu looked around as he recognized the danger, then cleared his throat.

Chuga chuga clack chuga chuga

The train made familiar noises as it leisurely ran its course on the rails.

‘...’

Jungwu focused on trying to come up with a solution.

The chemical knowledge that was embedded into his brain cells and his optic nerves worked together to provide a molecular biologist’s unique observation which magnified and showed the composition of the ‘static electricity bomb’. The elemental stars, which were wound like chains, appeared all over his vision on the fibers’ surface.

‘CO...NH...CH... if the amides are this closely linked together, there is a high likelihood that charges can accumulate due to friction.’

The nylon was the root of the problem. It was somewhat similar to the phenomenon where women who wore stockings had their skirt sticking on it because of the static electricity.

‘But that shouldn’t be enough to create a static explosion. Wait. NA...O...Si?’

Jungwu’s eyes shone as he found the transparent chemical stuck here and there in the gaps between the fibers. The stardust floating nearby clung onto this chemical then twitched as if they would explode any moment.

‘Was it you?’

The chemical that so easily snatched up the free electrons was sodium silicate. If enough were to be stuck on clothes and made alkaline from an ionic reaction, then it would become a great material to attract free electrons. In addition, this would make the clothes stiffer than usual, so the coat’s debut as a ‘static electricity bomb’ was a foregone conclusion.

‘Neutralizing the ions take priority. If it’s sodium silicate, just sprinkling some water right now will have some effect.’

Jungwu was worrying over how he would communicate this solution that would take the threat from DEFCON Level 1 to DEFCON Level 5, when the woman looked up from her papers.

‘Hic.’

Her large, clear eyes, which did not have double eyelids, were looking his way. Her look seemed to say, ‘Why do you keep staring at me?.’

“Ah, th.....”

Jungwu panicked because as much as he was preoccupied with his chemical world, the fact of the matter was that he had intensely stared at her, to the point he felt he should apologize. Jungwu pointed towards her hand.

“Be careful of static electricity.”

“What?”

“When you get off the station, you should sprinkle some water over your outerwear and pat it down a bit. My goodness, your clothes are so stiff...”

The train arrived at a station, so people were starting to move around hurriedly. Jungwu was swept along by the crowd.

‘What is he talking about?’

Boyoung Song was confused by what the man said to her. She looked for where he had gone to, but finding a person on the subway that one had met casually, was no easy feat.

Whirr–

She tried to forget about it and go back to her papers when the phone in her purse rang. When she took it out, the caller ID showed her company [sunbae](#), Dong-gil Lee.

Korean equivalent of Japanese ‘senpai’. People who are usually older than you and/or people who have more years/experience than you in the same industry, workplace, school, etc.

– Beep!

“Yes, Sunbae.”

– Where are you? On your way to work?

“I’m on the subway.”

– Boyoung, are you really?

“When I was in Munich I took the subway every day.”

– Seeing that you’ve taken to ‘Cosplaying as a Commoner’, your father’s been saying to get involved in the management....

“Sunbae.”

Boyoung Song knit her eyebrows.

“If it’s small talk like this then hang up. I am busy.”

– Uh-hut! Wait. There’s something big going on.

She asked with an uninterested expression.

“What is it?”

– I just met the head of HR and heard of this shocking news. There's a special hire that is [parachuting](#) into the lab.

‘Parachuting’ is a kind of mocking euphemism for how people get positions/hired due to connections with people higher up in the company ladder. Usually it means requirements/qualifications are disregarded or irrelevant due to their connections.

“Don’t they occasionally recruit researchers?”

– And don’t be surprised by what I’m about to say. On top of that, they said Dr. Seung-guk Chun selected this person himself.

Boyoung So’s eyes were wide open despite the warning in advance to not be surprised.

“Dr. Chun? There’s been no news from him for 6 months ever since he’d left saying that this is his sabbatical year. When did he come back?”

– Hold up. I didn’t get the chance to ask that much. Should we go to HR to dig up some more info? We could go for brunch at the cafe in front afterward.

“Forget it. Let me ask them myself.”

– Wa-wait! Boyou...

Blip.

Boyoung Song placed her phone in her purse then returned to reading the paper.

[Next Generation's Biocode]

It was a scientific paper that Seung-guk Chun had written towards the end of his stay at Heidelberg's Biochemistry Center in Germany. It held a theory that was regarded as exceptional even today, more than ten years later.

'The person Dr. Chun had scouted himself? I need to see this person soon.'

Maybe because she hoped Dr. Chun would return, Boyoung Song had resolved on committing herself even more to the study. She went back to focusing on the next paragraph in the paper.

While reading, she pressed herself against the wall on reflex when the subway train shook. Just as she did, she felt the spark from static electricity and was taken by surprise.

"Are you alright, student?"

"I'm alright, ma'am."

She couldn't help but smile at the fact that the elderly lady regarded her as a student. Well, if you thought about it, she was at

the age where many people would still be studying. At 26, one could easily be regarded as a graduate student. However, she had already been a full-fledged researcher for a full year.

She bowed to the elderly lady to indicate her gratitude then bit on the finger that was still stinging from the shock.

‘This is why I hate winter.’

She stared at her hand absentmindedly then tilted her head as she remembered the odd words from earlier. You mean to tell me that he predicted this?

“That makes no sense.”

Boyoung Song shook her head.

She went back to reading the paper quietly. But before long, she was disrupted by a loud ruckus coming from the other side of the crowd on the train.

“Uwaaah! I don’t like it! Let’s go home, Mommy.”

“Hey, over there! Let’s be quiet around here.”

The child was crying loudly. Other passengers on the train were upset from the noise. The crying broke her concentration and made her skin crawl.

Boyoung Song decided she couldn't read another word and took her eyes off the paper. It was difficult enough to try and read the paper in a quiet setting, and to force reading it now would only make her head hurt. She lowered her head to sort out the insides of her purse and noticed Dong-gil's text on her phone.

[Don't ask HR and instead, ask me over some tea. 10 o'clock at the lounge, OK? Also, check out this mug shot of the parachuter]

A picture that looked like it was taken at a personnel records bureau came up on her phone.

'Oh? This face...?'

Jungwu was staring at the wailing kid with a sorry expression. The child looked to be around 5 years old.

"I'm so sorry. My son has eczema."

The mother kept apologizing for her child's behavior. When the kid repeatedly scratched his arm, she told him to stop. The kid kept crying as he scratched and the mother stopped him, telling him that he was going to get a scar. The kid then threw a tantrum for which he was chided by the mother.

'Talk about rinse and repeat.'

Jungwu felt for the kid who couldn't adjust to the subway environment, but he didn't know what to say. However, that didn't change the fact that the child was the source of the noise.

“Harumph!”

An elderly man, who was reading the newspaper, sent a contemptuous look towards the two.

“What’s so special about eczema? Regardless of whether you are an adult or a child, you should learn some public etiquettes. Damn them government bastards for removing it from the textbooks.

Tsk Tsk.”

But the way he spread out his newspapers to the point of pushing off the passengers seated next to him wasn't a good show of manners either. The little kid stopped crying, but his face was frozen stiff from getting scolded by the old man.

Jungwu stared at the kid without much thought when he noticed the stardust gather on top of the kid's head. It was because of his furry cotton hat.

‘Hey. If you’re going somewhere, go to that cranky old man!’

It was not intentional. But the stardust actually gathered into his

palm and then flew away. The problem was that the few strands of hair on the old man's head were getting caught in the stardust.

‘Isn’t that strange? How did it get affected?’

Wondering what the principle behind it may be, he moved his hand here and there until the stardust hovered above the old man's head. The old man's hair was pointing up straight as if it was struck by lightning.

“Wut.”

Jungwu moved his hand to the side to make sure he wasn't hallucinating, and the old man's hair matched his hand movements.

When the old man noticed that something was strange and lifted his head up, Jungwu quickly hid his hand. The old man slapped his newspaper and stared around uncomfortably for a while until he finally lowered his head again.

‘Phew. My heart.’

The kid who was frozen in his seat witnessed all of this. Jungwu looked at him and brought a finger to his lips and whispered,

‘Shh’.

The kid shook his head up and down in big motions with a serious expression on his face, as if he regarded this as a great secret.

Jungwu returned his gaze to his hands.

‘What is up with this? Why are these free spirited free electrons listening to me? My hands don’t have sodium silicate.’

He tried to find an answer among his knowledge of chemistry.

The recent phenomenon could be explained as an event where the palms of his hands were temporarily charged positive[+] then changed to negative charge[-]. In theory, it was possible. The reason why your hair might stand up when terrified by watching a horror movie is that bodily electrical charges are transferred to your sensories. If you were able to control these electric signals even in a small way, wouldn’t it be possible to hold a small static charge on your palms?

‘Let’s try this.’

As he stretched out his hand, he could see the stardust gathering like a tornado. Nobody could see it, but Jungwu couldn’t help but be amazed.

‘Should I call this Sensory Control via chemical means?’

The ability to look into the molecular world was quite a shocking

experience. Despite that, this newly found ability as the master of static electricity was just as wondrous. Jungwu had gotten the gist of things and turned his gaze to the little kid. It looked like the itchiness from eczema had subsided for the moment, and the kid was now glancing at him repeatedly with eyes full of expectations.

‘Should I do it one more time for science?’

Jungwu quietly held his hand over the old man’s head once again.

Eventually, he felt as if the positive ions had concentrated on his palms.

As the negatively charged stardust gathered from all four corners and blew winds in the nano world, the old man’s hairs responded in tandem. At that moment, the subway broadcast played some advertising music.

Na~Nana~ wahttuwariwari~ in front of Seoul City Hall, your good neighborhood dentist...

‘[Dance with DOC](#)’ is it?’

He didn’t do it intentionally, but he couldn’t help but let his shoulders move a bit to the beat of the catchy tune. Due to this, there was a huge storm brewing in the world of the stardust.

The old man’s hair also started dancing.

Chapter 5 – A Certain Chemical Company's Intern's Day (3)

‘You guys can dance quite well.’

Jungwu was taking in the spectacle of the stardust's static electricity dance until the old man turned his head, to which he responded like lightning pretending he wasn't doing anything.

Coincidentally, few people who were looking this way were stifling their laughter from seeing how the old man's hair was standing straight towards the sky.

The old man said, “what's that noise?” as he looked around. Perhaps because of his ill-mannered conduct earlier, there wasn't a single passenger who told the old man about his hair.

– This station is Yong San, Yong San station.

“Harumph!”

The old man folded up his newspapers and stood up, getting ready to leave.

‘Gramps, go outside and look in the mirror.’

The doors of the subway car opened and the old man disappeared. He will probably make a lot of people laugh as he

walked down the street. The little kid that had watched it all looked at Jungwu with a smile.

“You little rascal. You’re not crying anymore.”

“Mmhmm. That magic was fun.”

“Magic?”

He didn’t plan this, but as the child looked up to him, Jungwu had a surge of confidence.

“Eh-hem. Hyung doesn’t do something like this willy nilly but this was a special showing.”

The kid’s eyes were shining with respect.

“What’s your name?”

“Eun-soo.”

“Where are you headed?”

“I’m going to my aunt’s house with my mom. We’re going to eat tasty things.”

During this conversation, the child’s mom gave him a thankful

look. The kid must have gotten used to being in the subway environment, as he had a comfortable expression on his face now.

A moment afterwards..

Jungwu waved his hand at the kid as he heard the announcement for the transfer station that the train was approaching.

“I’m getting off here. Farewell Eun-soo.”

“Bye.”

He walked over to the door and looked at the map of subway routes. He looked at the time, which read 7:45 AM.

‘After transferring, I have 3 more stations, right? If I get pushed out at the gate, I might be late.’

Jungwu was making up his mind to leap out as the doors opened when he felt the intimidating flow of stardusts moving towards him and turned his head. The woman with the ‘explosive static electricity coat’ from earlier was approaching him.

‘Shoot.’

He pretended he didn’t see her as he looked outside but her beautiful face that could be seen on the glass window’s reflection made him flustered. It was a look that was pure without any

indication of makeup. She was pretty but younger than he thought.

She stood right next to Jungwu. He distanced himself a little bit on reflex.

“Excuse me.”

‘Huh?’

Jungwu responded to her call by pointing to himself.

“Are you talking to me?”

“Yes, you.”

She nodded her head as she walked one step closer to him.

He thought that he should apologize if she asked ‘why did you stare at me 10-ish minutes ago’, but she asked an unexpected question.

“How did you induce static electricity with your hands?”

“Excuse me?”

She covered her mouth and whispered in a small voice.

“Just a little while ago, you moved that old man’s hair at will.”

“Ah, that is.”

The train slowed down. Jungwu replied with an apologetic expression.

“I’m sorry, but I have to get off here. I don’t think I will be able to explain..”

“I’m getting off too.”

“...I see. But I have to hurry off to transfer to the next train.”

“I’m also transferring.”

Jungwu was a little scared.

‘What is this? Is this how pseudo religions recruit people these days?’

He briefly felt he wouldn’t really mind joining a cult with a recruiter like her, even if she asked “Do you know Tao?”, but he quickly shook himself from the thought.

While he was thinking that, she asked.

“You are going to KG Chemical Central Laboratory right?”

He had chills running down his spine. Pseudo religions these days seemed to do their research before approaching their targets.

“How did you...”

“It’s not whatever you are thinking.”

She whipped out her employee card from her coat. ‘KG Chemical Central Laboratory Boyoung Song.’

Jungwu had to stifle himself from making a noise as he read on. This company is definitely huge.

He had already met a coworker on the way to his first day on the job.

“Do you get it now?”

Boyoung spoke quickly as she lowered her name tag.

“I learned about you from the contact I have in HR, so don’t be surprised. I work at the same company as you.”

It hadn’t even been that many hours since he signed the contract.

He tried to pull himself together and greeted her.

“Hello, I am Jungwu Han.”

“Yes, it’s nice to meet you, parachuter-ssi.”

“...Parachuter?”

“Isn’t that right?”

“Ah, you’re right.”

He just nodded as he remembered Dr. Moon’s warning.

Boyoung scrutinized him carefully in a way that made him uncomfortable. Honestly, he still found it hard to believe that she was a corporate employee given how she looked like a college freshman at most. He wondered if the female employees were selected by their faces more than anything as he thought of both her and Dr. Moon, when Boyoung Song followed up with a question.

“You warned me earlier about a static shock, right?”

“I did?”

“I am certain that you did.”

Ssst

People poured out of the doors of the subway car as they opened, and Jungwu was pushed out along with them.

Boyoung Song also followed suit.

“Come, tell me about it. Why did you say such things.”

On the way to the transfer gate, Boyoung Song’s eyes burned with scholarly ardor and they beckoned him continuously for his reply.

‘This is going to be difficult to just shake off.’

The principle behind it was simple. All he was doing was observing the movements of free electrons and saying it for what it is. However, it was a completely different matter to communicate this to someone who could not perceive these chemical phenomenon in the same way that he could.

‘I could come off as some kind of lunatic if I were to explain in terms of stardusts that I can see.’

Is this similar to the predicament you may find yourself in if you had to explain the color and the shape of an apple to a blind person?

Jungwu glanced at the 'Explosive Static Coat' before he spoke.

"You know that coat of yours,"

He pointed at her coat as he continued

"It has sodium silicate all over it. That's probably the reason why static electricity has gathered to such a great extent over it."

"Silicate? What are you talking about?"

Jungwu squinted his eyes and examined the coat more closely.

"I can see the Zeolite and Polycarboxylic salt... But wait, if these are all found together, weren't they formed during the process of laundering clothes? Ah, that's right. It was the detergent."

Boyoung Song's both eyes grew wide as she heard this.

"Excuse me, parachuter. Are you telling me I have detergent powder on my clothes, now?"

"There's not enough to be noticeable to the eye."

"What a joke."

As Boyoung patted down her clothes, she was at a loss for words as white detergent powders scattered into the air.

“Oh my.”

“Huh? I guess there was more in the lining. No wonder.”

Jungwu nodded his head as if he had solved some puzzle.

“Occasionally, I will also make the same mistake when I run the laundry machine. Like putting in detergent when your clothes are in the dryer. When I do, I get a hell of a scolding and beating from my mom.”

Despite Jungwu’s no-big-deal attitude, Boyoung Song’s pupils were shaking as if they were in an earthquake. Her gaze alternated between looking at Jungwu with an agitated expression and staring down at the part with detergent powder falling off of it.

“D-Dry cleaners were...”

It was obvious that she was lying. This had clearly resulted from the actions of a household newbie who could not distinguish between dry cleaning and water based laundry.

“That dry cleaning store must be a place where they use the entire container of detergent even when they are laundering just one piece of clothing. Their dedication to their craft is outstanding.”

Jungwu was laughing hysterically inside when he noticed Boyoung Song staring at him intensely before he turned his head away. The two of them went past the transfer gate and got on Line 9. It wasn't as packed as Line 1 so he was able to get a footing and some leisure in comparison.

“...And about the hand – the static electricity just got really serious at some point. I didn't induce it on my own.”

“So you are telling that this is a coincidence.”

Just as it seemed like Boyoung Song's curiosity ended, she threw another question at him.

“Parachuter-ssi came in due to the recommendation of Dr. Seung-guk Chun, right? Are you his disciple or something?”

Because Dr. Moon had instructed him to use Dr. Chun as an excuse, he nodded. As she confirmed his reply, Boyoung Song's eyes shone brighter than before.

“Where is he now? Is he alright? He just left on vacation all of a sudden and even though I wanted to visit him, I couldn't find him on my own.”

“I don't really know the recent ongoing about him either.”

“Why?”

“I wonder too.”

He obviously couldn't say anything about his circumstances regarding the contract and furthermore, he genuinely had no knowledge, so he could not give her the answer she wanted.

“So, it's a secret?”

Boyoung Song raised her eyes to him.

“Please tell me at least one thing.”

“Even if you plead like that...”

“Just tell me where he is at the moment.”

“Well, he must be having a nice time somewhere.”

Boyoung Song puffed up her cheeks as she sulked from his continued rejections. She finally decided she couldn't get anything out of Jungwu and turned her head with a “Forget it!”.

“Yes, yes, it was strange. He always gave the excuse that there were no seats available when I made multiple requests to get a project. But now he filled up that spot with his parachuter disciple!

That detergent talk earlier was totally in the professor's style too, the way it makes a person flustered. So the disciple gets special treatment and I'm to be ignored? This pisses me off, really."

"... Excuse me, Boyoung Song-ssi. I'm still right next to you."

"I said that for you to listen."

"Why do I have to listen to.."

"You're my rival."

He didn't know how to retort as he wasn't sure how he was a rival to her.

Boyoung Song closed her mouth and stared outside as if she wasn't willing to talk any longer.

'Is she really angry?'

Maybe because her eyes were so round that even when she was angry, she was cute. She gave off the feeling of a pet dog that was disappointed from not getting a snack.

The train had arrived at Yeoido Station.

Jungwu stared at the clock on the electronic guidance panel and

practically leaped in surprise. It was 7:57 AM. He had 3 minutes left to show up as an intern.

As he got off at the station, Jungwu talked quickly to Boyoung Song.

“It looks like I have to hurry. There’s only 3 minutes left.”

“3 minutes?”

“To show up on time for work.”

“You just need to show up by 9 o’clock.”

Boyoung Song had the ‘you got it wrong’ expression.

Jungwu got on the escalator first and turned back.

“No, let me explain.”

Jungwu was trying to tell her about leaving a good first impression on an intern’s first day when he was surprised by what he saw on her coat. The stardusts had gathered like clouds as people brushed past her.

“DEFCON Level 1.”

“What?”

Boyoung Song yelped a little as she was hit with a spark from the static electricity as she tried to grab the escalator rail.

“Ow ow. Damn it! This again?”

As she shook the pain off on her hand in annoyance, she momentarily lost her balance and was tilting over when Jungwu stretched out his hand towards her on reflex.

BZZT

Their hands met and static electricity flowed between the two of them.

Boyoung Song yelled once again and Jungwu, who was flustered, exchanged glances as they stood still for a moment in silence.

“... Th-Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Jungwu had grabbed her hand tightly unlike his usual self. He flinched as he stared down at that hand. The free electrons were coming off her coat and were transferring over to his hand.

‘Don’t come here. Shoo.’

Jungwu quickly let go then spoke.

“When you get outside, please take care of that static electricity coat first.”

“It seems like I should.”

“Also, please leave your laundry to an expert.”

“I should do that t ... You think you’re funny?”

Boyoung Song whipped her head up.

Phone vibrating sound.

Jungwu took out his phone and held it up when he heard it ring. It was a text from Dr. Moon.

[I let HR know, so visit there first.]

‘Sharp as a knife. Exactly 8 o’clock.’

Jungwu spoke to Boyoung Song as he arrived at the end of the escalator.

“I need to go in first. It was good to meet you, Boyoung Song.”

“It was good to meet you too, Parachuter-ssi.”

Jungwu ran to the exit stairs.

Boyoung Song watched his figure from behind as he ran off.

Chapter 6 – A Certain Chemical Company's Intern's Day (4)

Jungwu stood before the twin buildings as he gaped at them. The buildings, which appeared newly built, towered over the surroundings.

KG Chemical.

[Domestic Employees 14,000. A global chemical corporation with 11,000 employees overseas. They worked with brand new top-of-the-line materials, such as batteries and displays, to everyday-life materials such as textiles health supplement and more. Establishing the foundations of almost all products manufactured by KG Group are ...]

Jungwu walked inside the building as he remembered the article on KG Chemical that he had looked up on the internet.

He went past the lobby to stand in front of the receptionist desk.

“I am Jungwu Han. Today's my first day as an intern.”

“Can I have your ID, please?”

The employee quickly looked it up on her computer and issued a temporary access card. He showed this to the security guards then passed through the glass doors.

KG Chemical's buildings were divided into two; East and West sections. The Eastern section had state of the art facilities, where the main research took place. The Western section held the headquarters for Sales, Finance, and Operations.

Jungwu confirmed the location on the building's map then headed for the western elevators to go to the HR on the 7th floor.

There were 10 operational elevators.

He really felt like being part of the workforce as he stood among all of the people waiting on the elevators to get to their respective workstations.

‘Starting today, I work at this company.’

Ding dong.

As the doors opened, Jungwu stepped in with gusto.

“You can use your Employee card at the restaurants on the premises, and the amount will be subtracted from your next paycheck. Likewise, most of the convenience facilities within the company can be accessed with your employee card.”

A spacious meeting room took up space inside the Human Resource Center. At the end of it, an HR employee sat Jungwu

down and comprehensively explained the policies regarding the use of company facilities.

“This is the card for going in and out of the research section. Unlike the employee card, there are different levels of access. If you happen to lose it, you will have to give a written apology to get another one, so please take great care of it.”

This is the kind of talk that’s usually given to a crowd of people selected from public recruitment or internships, but because only Jungwu was in the room, the mood in the meeting room felt a little awkward.

“This is quite unusual. They usually don’t give interns access to the research section. Well, a special hire must have been done for a special reason, right?”

The employee grinned as he handed over the employee card and access card.

“Do you have any questions?”

“No.”

“We are going to call the tour guide, so sit tight for a moment. Would you like Mix Coffee?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He had heard from Dr. Moon last night about the standard operating procedures at the research lab. She had talked to him for nearly an hour as if she was giving out a lecture. It was fortunate that he was wide awake during that time.

– “From now until the end of the year is the training period for new-hire researchers. So, try to fit in and get a feel of the atmosphere.”

He had forgotten most of it, but he remembered the end quite well.

Excluding the holidays, there were about 15 days left. This was probably the amount of time needed to determine whether the effects of AF-12 were enough for him to help out on KG Chemical’s research project.

5 minutes later.

“Jungwu Han?”

He turned his head as someone called his name while he was sipping on the Mix Coffee that an employee had handed to him earlier.

There was a man in glasses in his mid-thirties, who looked like he had studied quite a bit during his days as a student. He had a nice clean suit on him, and he was standing at the door with a smile.

“Congratulations on the job. My name is Dong-Gil. I am the head of Team 1 Research team of the Central Research Laboratory.”

Jungwu was surprised that someone as high rank as the Head Researcher had come to greet him personally. He quickly rose out of his seat and bowed.

“Nice to meet you, Sir.”

Dong-Gil pointed towards the doors of the HR as he glanced at the nervous Jungwu.

“Shall we?”

“Yes.”

While they were on their way to the elevator, Dong-Gil examined the newcomer, who had the intern’s employee card hung around his neck, before he said.

“You don’t have to be so stiff. I decided to come here because I was curious about the new hire. Anyway on your resume... it said you studied business administration.”

“Ah... yes.”

“Do you have any experience participating in any research

projects?”

“No.”

“What about something like a chemistry affiliated internship?”

“I-I have no such experiences.”

“What about personal research patents? Performance overseas? Association license?”

As he continued, Jungwu could only shake his head at the questions asked of him.

Sighing deeply in exasperation, Dong-Gil asked.

“Then what exactly is it that you know how to do? There must be something.”

Suspicion reflected in the gleam of Dong-Gil Lee’s eyes. Just as per Dr. Moon’s warning, an employee hired under special circumstances like his were not viewed in a favourable light.

“Although I didn’t major in anything, I did study a bit of molecular biology before coming here.”

He made the excuse that he received proper tutelage and

guidance under the supervision of Dr. Seung-Guk Chun.

After pressing the elevator button, Dong-Gil turned around.

“Cell biology? Genomes?”

“Not to the extent of delving into such complicated branches I’m afraid. If you want to put a label on it, I guess you could categorize it as having some knowledge and understanding of molecules.”

“Ah, you self-studied a bit about molecules — is that it?”

Jungwu didn’t know if the slight laugh that Dong-Gil let out was one of mockery or dejection.

“Jungwu Han. Don’t misunderstand and just listen. Our laboratory atmosphere is considered to be extremely free and liberal. It is mostly not a type of workplace environment where there’s a boss but rather a senior-junior dynamic. And if a project goes on for an extended period, you might even end up spending an entire year’s worth of time seeing the same seniors and lab mates day in and day out.”

Dong-Gil stepped into the opening elevator that arrived and continued speaking.

“And therefore, this kind of freedom also comes with a certain deal of responsibility. An incompetent colleague who can’t pull his weight? At the industry where anyone can be cut or fired at any

time, no one is willing to carry dead weight.”

With his hands, Dong-Gil Lee made a cutting motion across his neck.

“Well, those are my thoughts anyways. Since you’ve gotten the recommendation of someone like Dr. Chun, I know that you’re not just fooling around. But I suppose it’s not as if anyone can get introduced into a laboratory with credibility like ours.”

Dong-Gil turned to see if Jungwu understood the message he was trying to convey, so Jungwu simply nodded his head.

“Yes... I understand.”

“Therefore, I was hoping that you could show off your skills at the ‘New Researcher Research Ideas and Proposal Assessment’ going on next week.”

“Assessment?”

Jungwu’s eyes widened at the unexpected proposal, and Dong-Gil Lee nonchalantly asked back.

“Why? Can’t do it? Well, it’s understandable since the other newcomers have been here since the fall and have had three months to prepare for this assessment. If you aren’t confident, then just forget about it.”

Jungwu got the subtle feeling that he really shouldn't make a refusal right here and now.

“No, it's alright.”

“It is?”

“Hey, if the proposal gets accepted, is it possible that it escalates into a full-fledged research project?”

“Of course.”

“Then obviously I have to do it. Since I came into this company with the goal of working.”

Seeing the previously shrivelling newcomer reply so confidently, Dong-Gil wore an amused expression.

“It seems like you are confident?”

“It's not like that”

‘More like, I guess I'll know if I try?’

Ding dong,

The elevator finished reaching the 1st floor.

“Okay. I’ll take it that you’ve accepted and will notify the training supervisor. Keep in mind that the guarantee of independence also comes with the responsibility to personally shoulder all the risks.”

Stepping outside into the lobby, Dong-Gil Lee spotted one of his colleagues who seemed like he was in a bit of a rush and called out to him.

“Gi-Tae!!”

A man that looked as though he was the same age as Jungwu stopped in his tracks. The fellow looked around side to side until he finally saw Dong-Gil and shouted back with glee.

“Sunbae!!”

The man who ran over had a tag hung around his neck identifying him as ‘Gi-Tae Bae’.

“It’s a lovely morning.”

“All right. It looks like you’re energetic as always.”

“Because I was able to see Sunbae-nim, I feel like I have a lot of strength now!! Haha.”

“Keep your flattery at a reasonable level.”

“Yes, Sir!”

Gi Tae Bae gave off the impression that he would thrive as a social butterfly.

‘I should learn from him.’

With feelings of truly wanting to learn, Jungwu carefully observed Gi Tae Bae.

Gi Tae Bae who had been elated to be chatting with Dong-Gil Lee turned to look at him.

“But who’s this person?”

“Jungwu. This here is the Supervisor in charge of New Researchers, Gi Tae Bae. Gi Tae, this person is Jungwu Han, the intern I’ll be using at my side from now on.”

“An intern? Aha, since it’s the break, KG Chemicals must be starting interviews for ...”

“That’s not it. We don’t do internships. We’re too busy.”

Dong-Gil made a strange smile while glancing at Jungwu before continuing

“Jungwu Han is a special hire. In words, he’s an intern in name only; he’s on the same level with you. Show him around a bit and teach him the ropes.”

“Don’t worry.”

“Because I have a brunch appointment with someone, I’ll be going out for a bit. Jungwu should follow Gi Tae in the meanwhile,”

Dong-Gil Lee waved before walking out of the lobby.

Gi Tae Bae gave a deep perpendicular bow to the slowly disappearing Dong-Gil Lee.

“Nice to meet you Jungwu. The Central Research Offices are located on the second floor.”

Gi Tae Bae showed him the stairway and started walking.

“A special contract around this time of year, how fascinating. Excuse me, but what university did you graduate from?”

It was a question that he couldn’t help but hesitate before replying.

“Myung Oon University.”

“Myung Oon University?”

Seeing Gi Tae had a confused expression that said ‘there was a university like that?’, Jungwu went on to further explain.

“There is. On the outskirts of Sudogwon.”

“What did you major in?”

“Business administration.”

Gi Tae had expected one of the subcategories of chemistry, but he paused when he heard something completely unexpected. Sudden special-case Intern, allocation of unqualified staff into the lab... Gi Tae was completely certain that Jungwu was hired as a favor from one of the higher-ups.

“Perhaps...”

“Yes, you’re right. A parachuter.”

Upon hearing such a reply, Gi Tae Bae didn’t know what to say anymore.

‘Was I being too blunt about it?’

What if this person was the chairman’s son or something– Gi Tae’s worries and concerns were written all over his face.

Because Jungwu didn’t want to cause some sort of needless misunderstanding, he quickly spoke.

“Just comfortably treat me as you would any other underclassmen Sunbae.”

“Sunbae? Well, I suppose that’s true. I am your Sunbae, right?”

Gi Tae parroted Jungwu awkwardly and drastically became less talkative.

Looking back on it now, the incident on the subway before where he bumped into a company co-worker served as a blessing, since he was now mentally prepared to deal with situations like this.

Thus, Jungwu unintentionally caused his companion to fall silent as they climbed up the stairs together.

‘Oh.’

Upon reaching the 2nd floor, the sight of seemingly endless rows of semi-translucent outer walls entered his view. Not a single speck of dust could be seen in the corridor, and the entire floor was

partitioned by the glass walls.

On one side was the ‘Foundation Matter Center’ where you could observe experiments involving compound reactions. On the opposite side were big and large offices partitioned by low walls.

“It’s this way.”

Gi Tae Bae stopped in front of an office space that was smaller and much more narrow when compared to the others.

This space where a dozen or so low-quality library reading desks were pushed together seemed to be a place meant for the entry level staff to use as a personal workspace.

“Feel free to just use any empty desk. Also, since there isn’t really any assigned work to complete before the daytime conference...”

After implicating to him that he should just lay and rest, Gi Tae Bae was quick to disappear, leaving him all alone.

Jungwu tossed aside his briefcase on top of an empty desk and looked around the office. There were desks with evidence of others having been there, but no one was present.

‘What time is the conference?’

He had made an effort to get here on time, but no one was here;

he had not expected the meeting to be so laid back. There were no seniors to be polite towards and no other staff that he could exchange greetings with.

Just then as he was comfortably sitting in the office, the sound of a person entering was heard.

“Yeah. I just arrived. What did you want in the conference room so early?”

A curly haired man entered the office. He was talking to someone on the phone while he hung his jacket. When he turned around and met Jungwu’s gaze, he gave a small bow in greeting as a reflex.

Jungwu returned the greeting awkwardly when the man finally recognized him and said “What?”

“Alright, I know. I’m going now.”

The man urgently left the office.

Again, some time later, another person came into the office, got a text message, and sent a bewildered glance towards Jungwu before leaving quickly. Just like that, several researchers suddenly appeared and disappeared just as quickly. Jungwu couldn’t help but smile bitterly.

‘Are they bad-mouthing me in the lounge?’

He wasn't exactly hoping for a warm welcome, but he didn't want to be excluded.

'I wanted to leave a good first impression, but I'm not even getting an opportunity to introduce myself.'

The clicking of heels could be heard, announcing someone's arrival. Thinking that the person was just going to leave in a hurry like the others, Jungwu paid no mind to it.

"Where is everyone?"

The female's voice was familiar, so he unconsciously turned to see who it was.

"At least you're here, Parachuter ssi."

"Boyoung Song ssi?"

Instead of the coat that was carrying around a static charge, Boyoung had changed into a white lab coat and spoke to Jungwu when she saw him.

"Where's everyone else, though? I heard that they all came to work today."

"Probably in the lounge I bet"

“I should go gather several people ...nevermind. One person should be enough. Follow me.”

Boyoung Song gestured to Jungwu as he made a ‘to where’ expression on his face.

“To get ready for the daytime conference obviously.”

“Me?”

“No, me. Parachuter will just help out.”

To explain, Boyoung made a gesture of picking up boxes with her arms. Seeing that, realization had finally dawned upon Jungwu.

Passing by the maze-like hallway of the office area, Jungwu asked

“Is Boyoung Song-ssi also preparing for the New Researcher Assessment next week?”

“New Researcher Assessment? Why would I be doing something like that?”

“Aren’t you a new hire?”

Boyoung Song grinned.

“Why are you saying this to a Sunbae who is one year senior?”

“Ah....”

“It’s alright; I sometimes get these kinds of misunderstandings. Since I look rea~lly young.”

She said with expression overflowing with confidence.

“Dr. Chun used to tease me by telling me that I am as pretty as a doll.”

Jungwu’s attention was drawn to her soft looking cheeks, replying soullessly with “is that so”.

“Hah, who do you think was first place in last year’s new researcher assessment?”

“....Boyoung ssi?”

“Correct! At the time, Dr. Chun complimented me lo-ots~”

Boyoung Song kept emphasizing her closeness to Professor Seung-Guk Chun. She held her shoulders high with pride, giving a beaming smiling.

‘Mm.’

In the morning at the subway, he didn’t have an opportunity to think about it too deeply, but she was really obsessed over Seung-Guk Chun; to the point that she would declare a complete stranger such as him as a rival.

“Now that I think of it, the newest member of the laboratory isn’t one of the temporary hires but Jungwu ssi. Although graduating from the bottom was a little fast, the temporary staff struggled hard for the past three months so...”

“What struggles...”

“You’ll see.”

Boyoung Song showed a worrisome expression before walking ahead.

Chapter 7 – A Certain Chemical Company's Intern's Day (5)

Jungwu followed Boyoung Song to a much larger office than the ones reserved for the Temporary Hires. One with a wall plate that read 'Research Lab 1'.

'How nice, Spacious work stations. Do all full-time Researchers work in offices like these?'

Boyoung retrieved a file from a desk piled high with paper.

"This is the Weekly Meeting reference material. Please make 70 copies and bring it to the Conference room. And..."

Boyoung poked her head back into the office and shouted

"Seungju Sunbae! What demo are we doing today?"

"Metal Lab's new project."

"Oh right."

Boyoung flicked her finger as she said

"Go get Hempel, connection tubes and 10 beakers from the stockroom. Grab the Electrolysis device from the equipment room,

as well as the low-pressure gas torch. Catalyst Magnesium from the stockroom. And don't forget the Calcium."

Jungwu had the same expression as that of a greenhorn private, with 'What did you just say?' written all over his face.

"Please hurry, we only have 30 minutes left until the meeting"

"30 minutes?!"

He wasn't even sure if it was possible to do everything in 30 minutes, but Boyoung waved her hands urging him on.

"I still have documents to arrange. Go work hard Parachuter ssi."

Boom.

The door to the 'Laboratory 1' office closed.

'She brought me here to do this huh'

Sudden and overwhelming number of demands; He didn't even know where the copier was, and the list of materials he had to prepare was already becoming fuzzy. But it pricked his sense of pride to ask again.

He decided that he should start with making copies and began to

roam the offices.

‘This is the Senior Researcher lobby, this is the multimedia room, this is the equ...’

He stopped at the Equipment room after discovering it had two copiers. He stood before them and placed the documents into the first copier. After inputting [70] into the machines, it began to pump out copies effortlessly. Jungwu was relieved to see that the copies were being made without much difficulty.

‘Well, I guess it’s normal for the most junior member to do the menial tasks.’

While he was holding the documents for the meeting, the contents flowed easily into his mind.

The Weekly Meeting held on Mondays were meant to be a place where the researchers discuss last week’s progress and evaluate the work being done and discuss.

He had thought that because he was not totally ignorant on the goings of the lab that he would be able to quickly become accustomed to it.

Jungwu placed the next document in the copier and then took a look at the reference notes. While he was copying, he read the documents with great interest.

9:25 am.

After meandering through the storage space in the separate building, Jungwu barely found the items he needed from the sample room and put them into an icebox before leaving the building.

“Ah, so here you are.”

He heard a familiar voice from behind and turned to see that it was indeed Boyoung.

“Let me see inside.”

Boyoung checked the content of the icebox as if giving it an inspection and looked up in surprise.

“You do have everything. You adjust fast, Parachuter ssi.”

“It was thanks to your quick and accurate directions, Sunbae.”

Jungwu stressed the words “quick and accurate”, then resumed carrying the heavy icebox.

Boyoung shook her head, noting that he didn’t complain despite the physically demanding task she asked of him. “I need to focus on his bad sides” she said to herself

Jungwu grinned but didn't reply.

“Whew.”

Jungwu paused in the hallway to take a breather and put the icebox down. He asked Boyoung who was following from behind

“Sunbae, are you going to keep calling me Parachuter?”

“Do you dislike it?”

“Well, if you think of it in a different way, I was hired for one reason or another, and I haven't done you any harm.”

“You have.”

Boyoung asserted confidently when she noticed the sweat drops on Jungwu's face and backed off, looking a little sorry.

“Ah, well you will for sure in the future anyway. Professor Chun is famous for refusing to work with others. Since you are his pupil, it can't help but be disadvantageous for me.”

“But he's not here anymore.”

She couldn't reply because he was right.

Jungwu resumed carrying the box to the Fundamental Element Lab's Conference room located at the center of the building. He opened the door and entered the conference room.

One of the walls was entirely made of glass, so it was possible to view most of the building beyond it. There were also monitors with live feed video from the rest of the building, making this room a sort of a command center for the research center.

Once Boyoung entered, she scanned the room.

“Everything's ready...”

Neatly piled meeting reference documents, properly prepared demonstration equipment; It was far superior to how the temporary researchers had prepared for meetings when they joined 3 months ago.

Jungwu placed the samples on top of the table and turned to face Boyoung.

“Sunbae”

Boyoung was interrupted while admiring Jungwu's work and flinched.

“Wh...what?”

“It’s almost 9:30, but no one is here. Do we have to PA them over?”

“Ah, that’s.”

Boyoung was careful about how he might respond as she took out a canned coffee and handed it over.

“The meeting is actually at 10.”

“Excuse me?”

“How can the responsibility for preparing the meeting lie solely on the most junior member? I just wanted to make sure there was time for me as a Sunbae to step up in case you messed up... anyway, I apologize. Drink this and rest now, for the remaining half an hour.”

Boyoung laughed when she saw Jungwu’s expression, as she waved the can making a cutesy face.

“Ah, who would have predicted you would have everything prepared so quickly?”

Jungwu vaguely detected her intentions to mess with him, but he still took a breather and accepted the can of coffee.

Once she was done preparing the experiment, Boyoung had to

click her tongue and say

“I have to admit you were on point. Have you worked for a research laboratory before?”

“I’m just fast at adjusting.”

“You can’t do this with just ‘adjusting’. Just where did you meet Professor Chun? Heidelberg Research center? Daejeon Chemical Research Laboratory?”

“Well...”

“What, you’re not allowed to say this either?”

Jungwu avoided her piercing glare and said

“Thank you for the coffee. I’ll just...”

“Where do you think you’re going? The meeting is soon. The most junior member sits there...”

Boyoung pointed to a seat in the corner, so Jungwu asked

“Do you have anything to do?”

“No. You did everything already.”

“Ah.”

Jungwu was worried that she might start interrogating him about Professor Chun, so he was looking for a way out when he noticed Boyoung’s sparkly eyes.

It was the eyes of someone who gives her best in everything she does; A contagious attitude.

‘Now that I think of it...’

She was jealous, but she was confident that he was someone with considerable skill simply because he was said to be Professor Chun’s pupil. Just how high did she see the professor’s abilities?

Click

A group of people entered the room, interrupting Jungwu from his worries. Jungwu turned to see and saw six researchers headed by Gi Tae enter the room.

‘That’s intimidating in its own way.’

It was the group of people Jungwu suspected of gossiping behind his back earlier, but Boyoung cheerfully greeted them.

“[Hoobaes!](#)”

underclassmen, opposite of Sunbae

Everyone who entered bowed upon noticing her and returned her greeting.

“You’re setting up the meeting right? Is there anything we can help you with?”

Gi Tae asked, walking up to her, but Boyoung waved him away.

“Go take a break since Parachuter ssi here took care of everything.”

“Ah... that... Jungwu Han ssi was it?”

Jungwu met Gi Tae’s eyes. He couldn’t tell if he was smiling or frowning; such an awkward expression. It seemed as though Gi Tae still didn’t know what to think of him.

Since this was their first official meeting, Jungwu quickly greeted his Sunbaes.

“Nice to meet you all. I am Jungwu Han starting today as an Intern at the Central Research Lab.”

One of the researchers with curly hair and a big build with the name ‘Sunghwan Jo’ written on his name tag asked

“I heard from Gi Tae earlier that your major was Business Administration... is this true?”

“Yes.”

“Did you apply for the Policy Planning team or the General Affairs and Welfare team?”

Jungwu shook his head, not even sure what those teams did.

“Then Human resources?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“My goal for now is to become a full-time researcher.”

His answer clouded everyone’s face.

Jungwu couldn’t help but sigh. He couldn’t tell them that his knowledge of chemistry had gone through an explosive growth due to taking a pill.

Instead, he decided to be blunt and act confident; like the protagonists in Kdramas.

“I hope to be an asset for the Central Research Laboratory. Please take care of me, Sunbae.”

“Ah... good luck.”

Sunghwan made an awkward smile and patted him on the shoulder. Boyoung tilted her head in confusion.

“Parachuter ssi is a business major? How is that possible?”

She who was full of nothing but questions from the start began interrogating him again with wide eyes.

“Dual major? Met Professor Chun during his research project?”

Jungwu scratched his chin.

27 minutes remained until the meeting. He would have to hang on until then in silence. Jungwu avoided Boyoung’s gaze as much as possible as he quietly sipped away at the can of Coffee.

The Researchers sat around the U-shaped conference table.

“We will now begin the Weekly Meeting.”

The Senior, Temporary, and regular researchers all began to check the reference documents as the meeting began.

Chapter 8 – A Certain Chemical Company's Intern's Day (6)

Jungwu turned to look at Boyoung who had a particularly high level of motivation while reading over the research reference material, even among the regular Researchers.

Jungwu realized few things as he kept silence during the break time and watched her mingle with others.

To begin with, the office she had been using with the label 'Research Lab 1' was reserved for Aces of Central Research Center. She was a researcher who obtained her Master's Degree from a famous University in Germany. Of course, the other researchers had similarly impressive Alma Maters.

'You never heard of Myung Oon University?'

He had barely managed to get into this college located in Seoul after countless sleepless nights of preparation, but no one here knew of it. And he didn't want to explain it to everyone when they gave him strange looks because it hurt his dignity.

"We will begin with Team 1."

As soon as Dong-Gil made the announcement, the powerpoint was put up on the screen.

“The Perovskite Solar Power Generator our team developed received 18.1% energy to power conversion rating from the Renewable Energy Research Center. This brings our ranking to 2nd in the nation. We aim to bring up the efficiency by 3% and make a bid for a top world wide rank.”

The meeting was carried out in a calm business professional atmosphere. The Researchers asked questions, provided suggestions, or carried out a short debate as needed. Jungwu was reminded once again that this meeting was full of highly educated and intellectual individuals.

“The Team 3 is working on Heavy Straight Run Naphtha (HSR) Fluid Catalytic Cracking refining...”

Just a week ago all of this would have sounded like alien speech, but the contents were now being easily comprehended and absorbed by Jungwu’s brain. He unconsciously fixed his neck tie and sat up straight; He now had the knowledge and skill to participate in this kind of environment.

‘No need to be intimidated.’

After about 10 minutes the team leader of the 4th Regular Research team, Sangshik Jung, held the mic.

“We have entered the final stages of ‘Food Additives with Organic Flavors’ research commissioned by the KG Foods.”

Several images of familiar foods additives appeared on the powerpoint slide; Brands like “Dashida”, which was famous for its nonintrusive flavor.

“According to consumer feedback, the majority of food additives produce an artificial taste which adversely affects flavor. So our research team focused on development of food additive that enhances aroma without affecting the taste.”

Next page had the result of their work, a new line of food additives and their chemical structures.

“The new line of food additives made with nucleotide compound as the base were found to produce a less artificial flavor than additives developed by other companies.”

Jungwu thought that the announcement would end without any further development like the Team 1’s announcement, but the Researcher sitting at the center picked up his mic.

“You said that the research was successful, but KG Food rejected the product right?”

“Ah... yes, sir.”

Sangshik’s expression darkened when he was confronted.

“This is a problem we need to address, regardless of the test result. How could we call a project rejected by the commissioning

company a success?”

Jungwu felt that the speaker’s tone and authoritative attitude indicated a fairly high rank within the meetings. Once he opened his mouth, the atmosphere suddenly transformed from intellectual gathering of peers to that of a Chapter Hearing.

Sungwu turned to read the man’s name tag.

Yoonseok Shin Head Researcher.

‘Ah...’

He recalled the conversation between Temporary Researchers from earlier, about the highest attainable position in the company as a Researcher. Yoonseok’s position in corporate term would be comparable to that of a Director.

Yoonseok paused to glance around the room, including to where the Temporary Researchers were seated. Since Jungwu was also seated among them, his locked eyes with Yoonseok briefly.

‘Wow, what a poker face’

Perhaps due to dignity and authority he carried, Jungwu felt intimidated just looking at him.

“Temps, do you understand why?”

The Weekly meeting was also meant to be an educational opportunity for inexperienced Temps.

Gi Tae pondered the answer and then raised his hands.

“Isn’t it because Rival companies like CJ and Pulmuone use Monosodium Glutamate (MSG) as the base where as KG Food is experimenting with the use of Nucleotide? It’s probably lacking the stimulating flavor of MSG. After all, what Consumers want is the MSG, not the organic ingredients.”

“Researcher Gi Tae Bae. Did you say you graduated from Kaist?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good analysis. Anyone else?”

“I suspect that reducing the amount of artificial food additives led to overall reduction of sweet flavor, making it less palatable.”

“That’s possible. Name....”

“Sunghwan Jo, sir.”

Sunghwan followed up with a feedback. The atmosphere shifted to one where researchers were tasked with using their knowledge of chemistry to find an answer, leading to several other Temporary

Researchers to also give their input.

‘So competitive...I guess it’s the evaluation period for selecting new permanent researchers’

The Temps gave their answers in order and eventually, Yoonseok’s attention was on Jungwu.

“Have we met?”

Dong-Gil smiled as he answered instead.

“He started today as an intern, Professor Shin.”

“Intern?”

Jungwu bowed while sitting, answering with “My name is Jungwu.”

“Why don’t you comment as well?”

Jungwu was about to shake his head when he noticed Yoonseok had low expectations of him. But knowledge of Chemistry contained in his brain revealed an insight far superior to that of any other temps.

‘Hmm?’

When he saw the chemical structure in the powerpoint slide, he had to swallow back a groan. He suddenly saw the Team 4's atomic structure diagram appear like stars in a constellation before his eyes.

‘This ability works on anything chemistry related?’

The stars floated above the powerpoint slide like a 3D movie.

‘That’s the Coagulation Inhibitor, that’s the Preservative. Food coloring. Sulfating Agent. Metal Scavenger...’

The various food additives were arranged into a massive structure; Something akin to Galaxy contained within the food additives.

The strange thing was that these structures of the chemical galaxy were in chaos; majority of the constellations kept on colliding into one another losing their light, star after star.

And

At the center was the source of the disarray; the Nucleotide which created disorder like a Black Hole.

‘If I keep seeing these things overlapped with reality, I might lose the ability to differentiate hallucinations from reality...’

Jungwu was watching the spiraling galaxy unfolding before him. Jungwu reflectively blinked away to return himself back to reality.

“I guess you don’t have anything to add.”

“Wait.”

Jungwu who was engrossed in the amazing chemical spectacle muttered unconsciously.

“This was going to fail from the start.”

Team Leader Jung, who had to listen in silence as the newbies gave their criticism, stared at Jungwu with disbelief.

“Hey, intern. Didn’t you hear that our experiment was successful?”

“Really? How strange. That’s not something that could work”

Jungwu pointed towards the powerpoint slide seriously, and the other core researchers began to laugh.

“Team Leader, that intern probably has no idea what he’s talking about.”

“Ha, I like his confidence.”

The Team Leader who was already feeling the pressure interrogated Jungwu.

“Tell me, Intern, why do you think so?”

Jungwu answered unfazed.

“The interaction between the additives are unstable. Because of the Nucleotide there.”

Team leader let out an audible sigh.

“So you’re saying the problem is the newly developed compound we spent 4 weeks developing?”

“The product itself is stellar, but there is a problem with the ratio between the components. They’re not able to interact properly.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“That’s”

Noticing the attention of the conference room was upon him, he felt that there was no going back, he decided to stand up.

“Can I modify the formula written on the Powerpoint?”

Team Leader Jung turned to look at Yoonseok Shin. Yoonseok who had been watching calmly stared at Jungwu for a moment before nodding.

The Team leader gestured towards Jungwu.

“Go.”

Jungwu stood next to the researcher in charge of the slides and quickly inputted the modifications to the chemical balances of the formula.

Jungwu decided to begin an explanation meanwhile since it was a time consuming operation.

“The human ‘taste’ is nothing but a response to chemical reactions. Even if, let’s say you get a traditional meat dish from the restaurant.”

Jungwu thought of the food his mother often made at their restaurant.

“The sound of meat cooking on the frying pan, the aroma, the flavor coming from the sauce, the succulent juices of the meat, the texture of the food... all these put together are what we call ‘taste’.”

Tatata

‘Beef flavored Enzymatically processed powder should be mild, so that the artificial meat aroma can spread efficiently, to improve absorption of Defatted soybean powder and Corn Gluten Meal....’

The adjustment of the components was complete.

“And food additives are purely a chemical method to artificially replicate those chemical reactions. Now, look.”

The chemical constellations created from the modified formula no longer collided nor lost their light, despite the massive black hole at the center of it.

Jungwu confirmed that the additives were all fulfilling their roles as he continued.

“In the end, the most important focus should be ‘how to trick the tongue’.”

“Do you think we’re unaware of that? So what the hell is this formula?”

“Artificial food additive which improves the flavor of fried meat.” Revision which improves the quality of flavor via adjustment of molecular composition. In Jungwu’s eyes, this type

of work was simple and straightforward.

“How can you backup your words with something you just scribbled up on the spot? The consumers demanded more naturally tasting flavor, so we created it. The feedback was positive. How can you say that this was doomed to fail from the start?”

The team leader could not see the information available to Jungwu. Against someone who required the end product to make a judgement, Jungwu couldn't help but feel frustrated.

How is someone supposed to explain the physical appearance of an apple to a blind man?

“ ‘Chemicals are harmful because they are chemicals, and organic materials were never harmful so they're superior' is a mindset of Chemophobics... Ah, I'm not saying you are like that”

“INTERN!”

The Conference froze due to the shout of the team leader. As soon as the mood in the room dampened, the expression on the Temps changed.

“What an interesting guy.”

The one who broke the spell was Yoonseok.

Jungwu turned to look and flinched. Seeing a completely expressionless man suddenly laugh was scary beyond measure. Especially since the man's features weren't friendly looking to begin with.

Team Leader Jung turned to Yoonseok with a face red with rage.

“You heard him right, Professor Shin? The things he says”

“If you feel so strongly, can't you just make a sample to prove him wrong?”

“It was something an [inexperienced dog](#) of an intern made up on the spot. What does he think a commissioned project is...”

Yoonseok's eyes seemed to glow.

“Sangshik JUNG!”

The team leader's eyes became round as marbles at his sudden thunderous roar.

“For how many years have you done research? How dare you assert your opinions, you [inexperienced dog](#)? I am right and you are wrong.”

“S...Sunbae nim?”

“If it was me who criticized you without any evidence, how would you react?”

The Team Leader Jung couldn't respond to Yoonseok who was grinning. So he turned to the members of the Lab 4 research team.

“Go make samples immediately.”

The Team Leader then calmed himself before responding

“It will take about 10 minutes to make the sample. Let's move on to the next topic until then.”

Jungwu gulped when he saw Yoonseok's nod.

‘What an immense character.’

The shift from his anger to laughter was too sudden and drastic. But the core research members must have been used to his personality since none of them turned blue in fear like the Temps had.

*Inexperienced dog – To understand the context, a little about the insult used:

Being called a dog is never good as it is quite insulting. Then the other most oft used insult is being called a baby. The difference is

that in Korean, there are many words to use for babies, and the one used in insult is usually reserved for beasts. So it's like telling someone they are unintelligent and as unworthy as a dumb animal.

So one of the MOST common insult is 개 새끼 or 개 같은 새끼.

Now the reason why I get into this dialogue is because what Team Leader of Team 4, research Team Sangshik Jung calls Jungwu is ‘하룻 강아지’, which basically translates to ‘a day old puppy’.

The reason why this is interesting is because this is not a common insult format, and it ties to an existing Korean idiom 하룻 강아지 범 무서운 줄 모른다니. The idiom itself translates to “a day old puppy does not know to fear a Tiger”. Which means, a thing without experience does not know better and will be unable to make wise decisions.

Being called ‘하룻 강아지’ is a triple insult on Jungwu's intelligence, and declares that he is a beginner with no experience or knowledge. The fun part is that the Head Researcher Yoonseok uses the same word (하룻 강아지) to insult Sangshik back.

Chapter 9 – A Certain Chemical Company's Intern's Day (7)

Afterwards, the talks continued on the subject of new projects and the demo. But everybody was distracted by the synthesis of samples being made inside of the composite storage room.

When the live demo was just about finished, Sunghwan Jo who was sitting next to Jungwu whispered to him sounding worried

“I don't think Jungwu ssi understands, but the project team leaders are famous for their pride. Why don't you apologize quickly before they get even more angry?”

“Even if I'm not wrong?”

Gi Tae entered the conversation looking incredulous.

“Are you saying you're some sort of genius or something? What makes you want to adjust the values in a chemical formula after just seeing them once?”

“But it wasn't my first time. I saw them earlier while making copies for the meeting.”

“What the hell...”

Gi Tae trailed off, unable to understand why he was so confident.

Sunghwan was worried that Jungwu was making a very big mistake and continued to say

“The problem isn’t just team leader Jung. You caught the attention of Professor Yoonseok. If you were to rank the most difficult characters of the entire Central Research Laboratory, the professor obviously comes first. If you get pegged by the regular researchers, then your days in the laboratory are as good as over.”

Jungwu only smiled to reassure them. He didn’t know how things will turn out, but he was almost certain that he was not wrong.

‘If I can’t do this then I wouldn’t be able to do what I was contracted to do and get fired eventually anyway.’

Jungwu took a glance across the room and saw Boyoung staring at him. She continued to observe him with her sparkling eyes.

‘Mmm...’

He couldn’t help but think that the most difficult character in the whole laboratory was that woman, who was overly interested in anyone related to Professor Chun.

“I guess they’re here”

Sunghwan leaned back to look out through the conference room window towards the interior of the Research Center. In the midst of the meeting that was wrapping up, the doors flew open.

“We have brought it,”

Everyone’s attention was on the icebox the team 4 carried in. The box was placed on top of the podium, and the fine gray powder was revealed inside.

Team leader Jung dipped his finger into the powder and tasted the sample with the tip of his tongue.

“How is it team leader, is it good?”

A strange expression appeared on the team leader’s face as he turned towards Jungwu.

“Hey, say something.”

The other researchers couldn’t contain their curiosity and rushed forward to try the samples themselves. After several researchers had a taste, they pondered on the flavor

“What a familiar taste...”

“Right? It tastes just like regular sauce.”

“Fascinating. I feel like if I were to put this over some meat, it would be...”

One researcher trailed off with his sentence after he remembered that team leader Jung was watching. The other researchers who tasted the original control sample from another icebox gagged, and cautiously looked towards team leader Jung.

“Team leader Jung, it’s not that this has bad taste, it’s just a little bland and greasy...”

“No.”

Team Leader Jung turned to face Jungwu.

“Your expressions are correct.”

“C... correct you say?”

When a consensus was achieved, everyone’s attention naturally turned towards Jungwu who remained seated among the researchers.

“You, Intern.”

Jungwu stood up when the team leader called him.

“How did you know the way to correct this?”

There wasn't much he could say in reply. It wasn't as if he could tell these talented researchers about the solar system made up of additives.

Jungwu smiled awkwardly and replied

“I guess instinct?”

The team leader made a tired expression. After struggling with the research for four weeks, he could understand that this flavor, this comfortable and compelling flavor, was a magic powder on par with MSG based additives like Ramen soup.

“What a completely utter... How could an intern have this kind of instinct?”

His conversation which implied defeat surprised the core researchers in the room.

Sangshik calmly faced Jungwu and said

“I will use your revised formula to make a new batch of samples and send it to KG Foods. If they accept it, then I will add in your name as a contributing researcher to the project. Let's just call it even after that.”

“Team leader, is it really that good?”

“This is insane. Who on their first day... Who scouted this guy?”

When the conference room began to grow loud, one of the researchers sitting in the front row said

“Okay meeting is over, so go back to your stations, people.”

“Professor, the intern managed to successfully revise a project that the Team 4 had spent over 30 days unsuccessfully developing. And in less than 30 seconds no less.”

“Why are you acting so surprised? Isn’t this why we work together as a team in research? Weren’t you all used to this kind of situation under Professor Chun?”

Among the muttering crowd, Yoonseok Shin stood up.

Once he began to move, the researchers moved out of the way like the Red Sea. Dong-gil who had been standing next to Yoonseok whispered something to him.

Yoonseok walked up to Jungwu’s desk and then turned to say

“Did you say your name is Jungwu Han?”

“Yes sir”

“And you are going to participate in next week’s assessment?”

“That...”

Jungwu’s eyes locked with Dong-gil’s. He grinned and raised a thumb.

“Yes I am”

“I look forward to it.”

Yoonseok left after patting him on the shoulder.

Once Jungwu saw the other core researchers bow towards Professor Shin, he quickly followed suit.

The lunch time at the central research laboratory was far more classy and leisurely than he had expected.

There were researchers taking advantage of the fully furnished fitness gym and the indoor squash court. Others were reading books at a Cafe with soft background music.

Of course, Jungwu was in no position to enjoy his lunch time so gracefully as the others as he hurried towards the cafeteria clutching his grumbling stomach.

He was only just now freed from his duties.

‘Work at the Research Center requires more labor than I thought. Ow, my neck.’

After the weekly meeting was over, Jungwu was dragged off by a Sunbae from team three to do lab assistance. He had to observe and record chemicals spinning in a centrifuge once every 10 seconds. It was work that required patience rather than technical expertise, so he had to concentrate and watch carefully for a long period of time.

“One fried meat please.”

After filling his tray with rice, soup, and other side dishes, Jungwu searched for a place to sit and eat.

Boyoung gave a satisfied smile as she walked out of the cafeteria.

It was the happy time of the day which indicated that only half a day’s worth of work remained on the schedule. She was humming as she made her way towards the elevators when she was interrupted by her cell phone’s ringtone.

-Ssong!

“Yes, Sunbae?”

-You didn't have lunch yet, right? I found a restaurant that makes really great Spaghetti.

Boyoung frowned in annoyance at Dong-gil's suggestions.

“I finished eating just now”

-Already?

“Lunch only takes 5 minutes to eat”

-If you eat that quickly, you'll get fat

“Sunbae.”

-Sorry sorry haha

Boyoung was pacing in the hall when she spotted a guy heading towards the far side of the cafeteria with a tray of food.

It was Jungwu, who she had no opportunity to speak to once the meeting was over due to him being surrounded by senior members of the research center.

-But you skipped breakfast and brunch, right? Wanna grab a coffee or something?

“I have something urgent to take care of. Enjoy your lunch!”

-Hey, Bo...

Beep

Boyoung put down her cell and ran over to the cafeteria entrance.

Jungwu took one bite of the Doenjang soup and nodded in satisfaction.

The quality was incomparable to his University cafeteria. He felt that the atmosphere of this place also added to the perceived quality of the food.

‘No need to get overexcited. This is how lunch is going to be from now on.’

He was laughing with the knowledge that he wouldn’t have to worry about what to pick for his next meal when a tray of food was placed before him.

“Are you eating alone?”

Jungwu looked up to see who it was and instantly became wary when he saw that it was Boyoung.

“Why are you so surprised?”

“It’s nothing Sunbae.”

“I hope you don’t think I’m following you or something. I just happened to see Parachuter ssi sitting alone, and I thought lunch would be tastier with company.”

Boyoung smiled as she picked up her spoon. She made a determined look as she put the spoon in her mouth, but didn’t lose the enthusiastic smile as she continued to look at Jungwu.

‘Awkward. Such unnatural behavior.’

It wasn’t like there were any other temps around. Eating with just the two of them while sitting across from each other; Jungwu could easily guess what she wanted. Just thinking about being harassed about Professor Chun like he had been in the morning sped up the pace of his eating.

“Well...”

As he expected, Boyoung already wanted to start asking questions, so Jungwu took the initiative before she could push him into a corner.

“Sunbae”

“...About professor.... Yes? What is it?”

Being ambushed with a question broke her chain of thoughts, and she blinked a few times.

“Sunbae why are you so obsessed with doing a research with Professor Chun?”

Jungwu stared at her with a ‘let’s hear the reason’ look.

“Are you serious? If Nobel Prize is going to be won for Chemistry in Korea, it’s definitely going to be won by Professor Chun.”

Nobel Prize. It was a word that was far too removed from reality to feel real to Jungwu.

“You’re aware that a maximum of three researchers are also named along with the main recipient of the Nobel Prize right?”

“I think I understand now.”

Boyoung looked happy to be talking about Professor Chun.

“There are still some theories he announced in Germany that

remains a mystery among the German scientific community.”

“Mystery?”

“It means the majority of chemists still don’t understand the core fundamentals behind his theories. But I read them all. I am the only one in our country to do so I think.”

Boyoung said, looking extremely proud of herself.

“And I have begun to understand a portion of his theories.”

“Amazing.”

Boyoung beamed at Jungwu’s complement. Meanwhile, Jungwu put the last bit of food in this mouth and quickly chewed.

‘I did it.’

His plan to have her go on a monologue worked. While he was planning to say a suitable farewell and escape from her, he saw her beating her chest and looking uncomfortable.

“I guess the cafeteria food is not agreeing with you”

“That’s not true. I, as well as Professor Chun, really love this cafeteria. We often ate together.”

“I see.”

Boyoung forced herself to take another bite.

“You don’t have to force yourself if you don’t like it...”

Jungwu stopped mid sentence. When he saw Boyoung’s lips, it looked like he was zooming in as if looking through a microscope.

What’s going on now

It wasn’t like there were any spectacular chemical reactions going on. But perhaps due to the influence of the midweek meeting and witnessing food additives being shown in the form of chemical constellations, he noticed the debris on her lip assume familiar star formations.

“Oh it’s lenthionine.”

“What is?”

“On your lips.”

Boyoung’s eyes grew wide in surprise.

“Hey, food can get on your lips as you eat!”

She took a napkin and wiped her lips, but didn't see anything on the napkin, so she raised an eyebrow.

“Are you making fun of me?”

“How strange. Lenthionine is usually found in Shiitake mushroom as the active ingredient of the aroma... but Sunbae's lunch doesn't use any mushroom at all.”

Boyoung flinched when she was found out.

Chapter 10 – A Certain Chemical Company's Intern's Day (8)

“No way, how could you possibly know that?”

“There's Cucumber Alcohol too. You didn't even eat Cucumber Kimchi. Are you... eating lunch for the second time?”

Boyoung was unable to hide her feelings because of his question and grew bright red. Jungwu who finally understood what was going on was left speechless. Boyoung had forced herself to buy and eat another tray of food just so she could speak with him.

“I...I was hungry!”

Jungwu couldn't help but let out a snort because of her poorly thought out excuse, and had to cover his mouth.

“Sorry, I wasn't trying to figure it out on purpose.”

“So you say.”

Jungwu had to stifle his laughter as Boyoung continued to glare at him with her mouth shut. Once she brought the food up to her lips, Jungwu made a suggestion.

“You should stop, you'll make yourself sick.”

“Let me be.”

But Jungwu didn't feel like watching her forcefully feed herself, so he put away his own empty tray and took the tray away from Boyoung.

“I was considering buying another set, so I guess it works out.”

“What are you doing?”

“If you want more, just go get another tray.”

Boyoung silently watched Jungwu deliciously eat away at her food while still holding her spoon in the air. Not too long after, Jungwu finished the food and rubbed his bulging belly.

“Ah, I ate well.”

“Parachuter ssi.”

Boyoung said to him after a long period of silence.

“Let's just say you passed by and saw me eat earlier. How did you guess the side dishes so accurately? Did you put a hidden cam on me?”

“I saw the material on your lips.”

“That’s what I mean. How? What you just did, it was like watching Professor Chun again.”

Jungwu stacked the trays to clean up as he answered.

“I don’t think there is any reason for me to reveal what I learned from the professor to you, Sunbae, is there? We’re rivals too and what did you call it? Nobel Prize. There can only be maximum of three co-discoverers, right?”

“That’s true but...”

Boyoung suddenly seemed to wilt. Smiling happily to suddenly dismayed; this Sunbae was such a dynamic individual.

‘Like that time when she managed to create that static electricity outfit by doing the laundry. She can be strangely comical sometimes.’

Jungwu who ended up unintentionally stuffing himself knew that it was about time he should be excusing himself. If he were to stay here, he would be interrogated endlessly until lunchtime was over.

“Thanks for lunch, Sunbae nim.”

Once Jungwu rose from his seat, Boyoung stood up with him.

“Parachuter ssi, do you have any plans for the afternoon?”

“The 3rd team Sunbaes have asked me to continue to assist them. Taking turns 1 hour each.”

“That means...”

Boyoung realized that she would not have an opportunity to call him out separately because the work required constant supervision and observation of the chemicals. She let her shoulders drop at the thought that she would have to wait until the next day for another opportunity to speak with him.

*

Jungwu massaged his neck as he continued to observe the liquid spinning inside of the Automatic Analyzer.

The compound spinning inside of the disk shaped tray was a catalyst used to better separate the Light Olefins, which is produced when refining petroleum.

‘So these Olefins are used to produce plastic, right?’

Now that he thoroughly and completely understood the chemical processes unfolding before him, even though none of these were

things he knew yesterday, the repetitive work he was doing in the name of research was nothing but yawn inducing.

Once the speed of rotation reached a certain value, the catalyst crossed over into the detector due to the centrifugal force. It reacted with the detector and values began appearing on the screen with the readout.

Once jotting those down, Jungwu waited another 10 seconds. Meanwhile, he yawned again which he seemed to be doing every 5 minutes.

‘So boring. I’m bored.’

After doing this for the entire day, Jungwu felt like he could understand what having ‘Cervical Herniated Disk’ would feel like.

“Jungwu ssi.”

The automatic doors to the analysis room opened, and a man poked his head in.

“Good work.”

“Is it time to swap with somebody?”

“It’s the end of your shift so you can go home.”

A member of Contact Decomposition Catalyst development team, the 3rd team researcher quickly skimmed through Jungwu's report before nodding.

“I don't think this will need a check over. Have you participated in a research project before?”

“No, not really. I just kind of...”

It would be most appropriate to call it intuition. And this level of research didn't even need the help of the vast chemical knowledge contained within his cells.

“You have a knack for this kind of work. I'll look forward to working with you again.”

“Ah, again?”

The researcher at the door gave Jungwu a thumbs up.

‘Hmm...’

He decided that he would try his best to avoid any kind of supportive work like this that didn't increase his work performance. This is not why he accepted the salary of 100 Million Won (USD 90,000) to join the research institution.

“I'm off then. Have a good day.”

Jungwu left the room and stretched before he headed towards the small chicken coop-like office where he left his bag.

‘So tired.’

But he still felt satisfaction from being able to assimilate into the research institution without much problem.

Once he opened the office doors and entered inside, he saw several full-time researchers sitting at their desks. Each of them was focused on something as if they were studying at their desks.

‘Looks like everyone’s planning on doing overtime instead of going home. Ah right, they must be preparing for the assessment.’

Jungwu had agreed to participate in the next week’s assessment, so he didn’t think twice before sitting down at his desk. He took out the old outdated laptop he had used all four years of his college years to take notes on and placed it on the table.

“Uh”

The desk was simple and had no electrical outlets built into it. And because the hallway was partitioned off to create this makeshift office space, there were also no wall plugs to be seen.

‘My laptop basically has no battery though.’

Jungwu let out a deep sigh and gazed over to the full timers who were working away on their high spec top-of-the-line laptops.

He had no choice but to work on it at home, he concluded, and stood up to leave. But then the cellphone in his pocket rang with a notification for a text message.

[It's the end of your shift, right? Please drop by.]

It was Doctor Moon.

Jungwu packed his bags and stood at the entrance of the office.

“I'll be heading home first, Sunbaes!”

The full timers turned in response to his enthusiastic farewell. An indifferent reaction. The only one to make an effort to give a short reply was Sunghwan who Jungwu had made acquaintance with today.

‘It'll get better.’

Jungwu entered the elevator and selected the 10th floor where Doctor Moon was said to be working.

Medical Biotechnology Center.

The front page banner of KG Chemical's website stated that the department was newly created and was aggressively pushing new research studies.

'This research division focuses on the upcoming Total Medical Care era for the aging population, or something, right?'

Once he reached the 10th floor, he found Doctor Moon standing in the doorway across the hall. For one reason or another, she was wearing outdoor clothes rather than the medical gown he had seen her wear in the morning, so she looked very different.

Doctor Moon had her long naturally straight hair untied which flowed down to her shoulders.

Jungwu called out to her.

"Doctor Moon."

Under her graceful eyelashes were her unfathomably deep and intelligent eyes, which turned to look upon him. Jungwu felt as if he was purified by her gaze as he walked up to her and stood before her.

"Welcome."

"Wow, such a warm welcome. It's the first nice welcome I've

received since entering this company.”

Doctor Moon looked puzzled for a moment, but she must not have placed much importance on it as she continued straight to her reason for calling him.

“You received security card for the Research Institution, right?”

“Yes.”

“You can enter Professor Chun’s personal research laboratory with that card.”

“This?”

Jungwu took out the red card from his pocket.

“But what’s the point?”

“You’ll know when you get there. There are notes and files there that Professor Chun was working on, or was planning to begin. From now on, head over to the laboratory after hours to confirm and familiarize yourself with them.”

“No way, you intend for me to continue...”

“That is correct. Please prepare yourself so that you can begin

work as soon as the adjustment period is over.”

Doctor Moon walked into the Elevator Jungwu had just left. Jungwu was about to join her when she stopped him by raising her hands.

“I have to head down. The Laboratory you need to go to is on the 25th floor.”

“You’re not coming?”

“Why should I? I am a Doctor, not a Chemist. Although, if you pursue a pharmaceutical project we may end up working together.”

The elevator door closed.

Jungwu stood in place for a moment before he finally realized that Doctor Moon had just handed him a task that fundamentally required overtime to do.

‘So merciless.’

She wouldn’t exploit him for having already signed the contract...he once again tried to reassure himself from the suspicion he was feeling.

‘Beep Beep’

As soon as the card was placed, the semi transparent glass doors opened up.

Jungwu looked around Professor Chun’s personal Laboratory with curiosity as he entered. The first thing that he noticed were the fact the laboratory was set up like a miniaturized version of the Fundamental Elements Lab.

‘So this is what an Executive Researcher’s personal office look like, eh?’

It was wide and spacious.

Once he opened the door on the far side, he found an office space filled from ground to ceiling with Chemistry textbooks on one of the walls.

The office featured a leather sofa for welcoming visitors, a wooden desk with a nameplate that read [Seung-guk Chun Head Researcher], and a very comfy looking executive style chair.

Jungwu briefly sat on the comfy chair.

“Wow”

A comfort like he never experienced before enveloped his back and behind. He could now understand why people spent so much money on good chairs.

‘There’s a computer here as well. I should use this office instead of the ones for temporary hires for preparing for the assessment.’

Jungwu propelled the chair along while remaining seated and moved himself to the cabinets. Once open, he saw that the cabinets were filled with documents that Professor Chun had been personally working on. And among them, he picked up the document with the most recent time stamp.

‘Perfect man Project?’

It was a crude title that used words which his knowledge of Chemistry did not provide any sort of explanation. And the document was completely blank. It appeared as though he came up with the idea but had not taken a single step forward.

The document was created on the June of this year, and there were no records afterward. It was also around the same time when Professor Chun had begun his Sabbatical.

There was a mountain of research documents Jungwu was expected to be familiar with, so Jungwu turned his attention elsewhere.

How much time had passed?

Jungwu glanced at the clock on the wall and stood up alarmed.

It was already 10 in the night.

‘There’s no reason for me to force myself on the first day.’

Recalling that he didn’t sleep last night at all, he was worried that he might collapse tomorrow.

When he was trying to place the documents back into the cabinet, one document fell off the pile and onto the floor.

“Hmm?”

He picked it up and read it.

[Any production involving ‘AF-5’ needs to be carried out with utmost care. Even a small breakthrough involving the use of this chemical could shake the very foundation of society...]

It was a note that was stuck inside of the completely blank research file, “Perfect Man Project”.

‘AF-5?’

Jungwu tilted his head, he recalled that a similar code name had

been assigned to the small blue pill he had taken last night. The term 'Perfect Man' had nothing to do with Chemistry so no hint was provided to him as to what it could mean.

'Is it possible that there are different pills than the one I took?'

Jungwu yawned as he left Professor Chun's personal laboratory. He had far too many research material to read through to be worried about a completely blank research paper.

"Ah... So exhausted. I'll just head home first."

His heart was racing in anticipation of his first return home from work, the same way he had felt when he was on his way for his first day on the job.

He thought about how from now on he would go head home after work and take a shower, dry his hair, perhaps drink a can of beer and think about his day.

He felt very happy just thinking about the ordinary things he would do while being employed; this was a world that he couldn't experience until even yesterday.

Jungwu's steps were very light.

He felt that he would sleep very well tonight.



Code: AF-12

Case: Master of Static

Research: If the Nerve Fiber in the palm could send electrical signals to promote ionic reaction, then it becomes possible to manipulate Free Electrons to a certain degree

Chapter 11-Old Steel (1)

‘Beep-slap!’

Jungwu closed the alarm the moment it began to ring. He blinked a few times before shaking his head.

“Damn it. Couldn’t sleep again.”

Day 5 of being employed with KG Chemicals.

Perhaps it was due to suddenly plunging into work life, but Jungwu felt his sleep cycle was all messed up. And having worked overtime every day including last night did not help.

‘Cruel Doctor Moon.’

The one good thing to look forward to was the fact that tomorrow was Saturday.

‘If I just survive another day then I can take as much nap as... Ah Doctor Moon, don’t tell me I’ll have to clock in during weekends too?’

He couldn’t summon the courage to ask. He shook his head as he opened the door to his room.

He had to duck his head slightly to climb down the stairs that he

had once run up and down as a child.

‘Delicious aroma.’

When he followed the appetite inducing scent and turned to look at its source, he saw his mother cooking in the kitchen.

“What are you working on?”

“Radish Soup”

“The one with lots of beef? Oh yay!”

“Not for you, it’s for Chan. So he can do well on the remaining tests.”

Even though she said this, she was the owner of ‘Jisook Restaurant’ which was famous for its large serving sizes, so there were no worries about his portion lacking any beef.

[“I wonder what rank he will hit this time.”](#)

Korean midterms and finals are ranked per class, per school, per region, per country. This is then posted everywhere publically.

Jungwu picked up the water jug from the table. He was about to drink from it directly when Jisook Hong came like the wind and grasped his shoulders.

“I told you not to put your lips on it!”

“Hey! I didn’t drink yet!”

“Don’t drink it!”

Jungwu sat down looking disappointed upon having the water jug taken away from him.

“You’re so mean. When I was preparing for the finals you always just fed me grass roots.”

“Why would I feed you well when you were 5th from the back? And you, we sent you to that expensive college, and what are you doing now?”

“Hmm...part time?”

Jisook picked up an egg and was just about to throw it because of his nonchalant response when Jungwu immediately raised both his hands to surrender and communicated his wishes.

“I request half done eggs.”

“Go wake up Chan. He won’t wake up even when I call.”

“Okay.”

His mother had a tendency of giving preferential treatment to the younger and more academically successful second son since long ago. He wanted to tell her that he had become quite intelligent the last few days, but he instead chose to somehow keep his mouth shut.

Jungwu opened up his brother's room and used his toes to prod the brother who was sleeping on the floor.

“Hey, wake up.”

“Mmm...”

“If you don't wake up I'll eat all your eggs.”

[Jungchan](#) suddenly raised his head when he heard this.

In Korean, there is a naming scheme called “Dol Lim”. The idea is that siblings, or sometimes an entire generation of cousins (usually of one gender, like all the boys, or all the girls) will share the same chinese character (and therefore pronunciation) on one of the syllables of their name. In this case, we can see that Jungwu and Jungchan have the same “jung” character in their name. This is why when the mother addresses her sons, she calls the younger brother “chan” because that's the unique identifier for the younger son, whereas the older (MC) would be called “wu”. I do not know exactly because the chinese character for the names are not shown in the raw, but Jung in names most often mean righteous, justice, pure, etc. Dol Lim names are often the same pronunciation on the

same syllable (Jung on first syllable for example)

Unrelated to this, the author of Chemistry has the exactly the same chinese character and pronunciation as my name, and my name was a result of Dol Lim being used for the character “Soo” (water) on the last syllable, because my family uses the elemental wheel to determine the Dol Lim character (My father was stone on first syllable). I’d be curious to know if the author had the same tradition in his family.

“Don’t eat it. I’ll spit in your rice.”

“Tell me that after you open your eyes.”

Use of competitive spirit to taunt his brother awake proved effective once again. Jungchan yawned as he climbed out of the blankets and asked Jungwu

“Hyung, why do you wake up so early nowadays?”

“I told you. My part time job is crazy hard.”

His younger brother looked so mature that it would be easy to mistake the two of them as being same aged friends. And perhaps because he was better fed, Jungchan was already the same height as Jungwu.

Jungchan threw on his sweatpants and asked Jungwu

“Wow, I’m surprised you didn’t quit yet. You must get paid well then. Will you be able to buy me [Pentawatch](#) skin box by my [winter break](#)?”

Pentawatch – a trademark friendly parody on Overwatch

Winter Break – Korea’s longest vacation (NA’s version of summer vacation). Lasts 3 months.

When Jungwu thought of how much money he would receive next month, his facial expression took a rapid change. An in-game item would be of negligible cost.

“You’ll reap great rewards if you behave well. Don’t wear my clothes, clean my room on weekends, and keep the living room clean.”

“That’s all I have to do? Really? You promise!”

“Is my word not good enough?”

The close-knit brothers who just came to an agreement entered the kitchen together. Jisook readied the bowls of rice and soup and placed them on top of the table as she addressed her sons.

“You know this isn’t for free, right?”

“Of course. I, the eldest son, shall repay this kindness with...”

“I’ll probably land within top 5. Sambum and Joonchul didn’t do that well this time.”

Jungchan interrupted Jungwu in the middle of his speech.

“5th place?”

Jisook pushed the bowl with the unmistakably larger amount of meat towards the younger son. Jungwu gave Jungchan a withering look and said,

“How is it possible that someone [from our clan](#) can reach top 5? And not from the back but from the front?”

Clan means family but it also includes extended family(grandparents, all their children and grandchilren, or to everyone with same lineage)

“Yeah.”

“Mom, who is he taking after? It for sure can’t possibly be y...”

Jungwu saw the ladle Jisook had gripped firmly in her hands, and shut his mouth. Jungchan turned his gaze towards Jungwu and answered

“I don’t know about me, but Hyung sure takes after our father. Including getting yourself into trouble.”

“You...”

Jungwu didn't have a good reply for the comment about his failure of a father. He really did resemble his father in many ways.

Even though he wasn't bad enough to be called a delinquent, he did enjoy slacking off like his father and had finally started to study seriously during the middle of his senior year of highschool, whereas his brother was the manifestation of the model student itself. The favored son of the clan.

Nevertheless, Jungwu was still number 2 in Jisook's hierarchy of love and grinned when he saw her put him half cooked eggs on top of the rice.

‘Just wait one month. You'll be surprised.’

Jungwu checked his clothes in the mirror which stood next to the entrance. He couldn't make it do with having just one pair of presentable clothes, so he spent most of the money he earned through working as a Human Test Subject on ordering a new suit and a white button up shirt.

“I'm off!”

Jungwu enthusiastically pushed open the gates and crossed the yard.

When the door swung open, it gave a loud wail that startled a

neighbor who was sweeping the yard. The man turned to search for the source of the sound.

“Hey Jungwu, can’t you do anything about that gate? Each time your mother leaves to go to the market in the morning, it sounds like ghosts are coming out.”

“I’m really sorry. I’ll oil it this weekend.”

While Jungwu carefully closed the gate, the neighbor took note of his clothes and asked,

“You’ve cleaned up quite well. Are you going to an interview?”

“Part time job. It’s getting cold so I got myself a muffler as well. Does it match my clothes?”

The neighbor nodded in approval and Jungwu smiled, feeling satisfied.

‘It’s good then. I know he has a good eye.’

Although he was retired by now, the neighbor had been a salaryman until a few years ago. And until now, Jungwu had not understood what an incredible feat it was that the man had managed to work at a company until retirement age.

“Oh yeah, I will be paying the cost of the meal for the next

monthly neighborhood meeting, so look forward to it.”

“Really?”

“I can’t mooch off forever. Though I’ll leave Soju to you.”

“Kaa, sounds good.”

Jungwu waved goodbye and quickly climbed down the hill.

‘I only have to wait 4 weeks, no, 3 weeks until my first paycheck.’

His wallet was not faring well due to his attempt to look the part of a respectable salary man working for a major corporation.

He immersed himself in a daydream about what he would buy next month. The newest model of Tablet, brand name sunglasses, expensive watches and such drifted by in Jungwu’s imagination.

‘Hold on, let’s first pay off the mortgage on the house first.’

His future in the research team was still uncertain. He needed to plan ahead; otherwise, he might suffer greatly after a brief period of joy.

‘But I should still be able to buy presents...’

He smiled remembering the look on his mother and brother's face when he bought brand new winter jackets for them. It wasn't long now until he would be able to walk down the street with his head held high.

‘Clack’

Jungwu who had fallen asleep was jerked awake by the sudden motion. He grasped the subway handle tightly as he opened his eyes wide.

‘Where am I?’

After briefly looking around he suspected that the subway was passing through Yongsan. Lucky for him, he was woken up before it passed the station he had to get off at.

After breathing a sigh of relief, he checked his disheveled clothes. Meanwhile, he noticed that the subway was slowing down.

‘Mmm? This isn't anywhere close to a station.’

– Dear passengers, this is an announcement. A piece of Han River Railway's superstructure has fallen and is now obstructing our path, so we have slowed down as a precaution.

The passengers on board began murmuring after the train conductor's announcement.

– The piece in question is a part of the rain drainage system. We are happy to announce that the structure of the bridge itself is unaffected. It will take approximately 5 minutes to remove the debris from the path. We highly appreciate everyone's patience. We are repeating this announcement...

Jungwu was shocked and turned to look out the window, but the bridge was hardly visible.

‘Why me.’

Seeing trains pass by normally on the other lane indicated that the issue was likely not severe, but it was still boring to wait without doing anything.

Taking out his cellphone, he spent 5 minutes surfing the web.

Woong, the Subway came back to life and began to move again, and the passengers who were nervous were able to finally calm down. The subway continued to move slower than usual as it made its way over Han River Railway, likely as a precaution in case of any unforeseen danger.

Jungwu looked out the window to try and see what part of the bridge had fallen.

‘The Rain drainage system...’

Was it because he was focused and interested? A phenomenon that he hadn't experienced in a few days unexpectedly resurfaced for Jungwu.

The fallen debris of the Han River Railway Superstructure became enlarged in his view as if he had taken a microscope to the object.

Once the smooth painted surface of the debris enlarged itself to the size of a cinema screen for Jungwu, he was able to examine the world of metallic surfaces.

'Ack, I'm getting motion sickness because of the train's movement.'

The motion sickness was similar to the one he had experienced when he tried out VR using his cellphone. Despite his discomfort, Jungwu checked the scientific information being fed to him from the enlarged image.

The yellowish green membrane that stuck like oil to the surface of the object was paint. Thanks to the hydrophobic property of the paint which reflected the droplets of water away, he couldn't spot anywhere on the surface of the metal where a chemical reaction was taking place.

'Clunk cli-clack'

Due to the subway train picking up speed, the image Jungwu was

seeing became shaky as well.

Jungwu gazed over to the bolt that was shaking due to the intense vibration and saw that the magnification had increased once more on it.

‘Free Electron, you rascals. You’re causing problems there too?’

He saw the familiar looking stardust on the object.

They were busily and freely flying back and forth between the bolt and the steel frame, slowly eating away and eroding the surfaces of the metals they bounced off of.

If anything was a source of relief, it was the fact that if the bolt was like the size of [63 Building](#) then the free Electrons were the size of a grain of sand in comparison.

63 Building is a famous building in Korea because at the time it was built in 1985, it was the tallest building outside of North America. It was the first Landmark building in Seoul, and is world famous as it was premiered in olympics and in Sim City 3000. It is a building that often symbolizes Korea.

No matter how much those electrons run wild, it would be difficult to cause any significant damage to the bolt. It wasn’t like shoveling alone away at the mountain was putting the mountain in danger of disappearing anytime soon.

‘It doesn’t look like something to be worried about.’

Jungwu resolved to stop looking and blinked a few times as he turned his gaze to the other side before he froze. He saw a bolt whose surface had become extremely worn out.

‘That one looks dangerous.’

If the superstructure were to come loose, it would stop the trains on the other side. The chances were low, but if something were to happen, it would delay his journey back home. And it might take longer at night to fix.

Jungwu turned to look at the “Seoul Metro Customer Service” number written close to the entrance.

‘Hmm’

He took a deep breath to calm himself before he picked up his cellphone.

After a brief dial tone, he heard an automated message. He followed the prompts until he reached the section where he was able to connect to ‘Miscellaneous, speak to an agent’ option. Selecting that option was followed by a message asking him to wait patiently. There must have been a flood of phone calls going out to the call center from the passengers who were being delayed by the debris.

– Hello, this is Seoul Metro’s representative Hojung Kim.

The call finally went through.

“Hello, I’m just calling because I was passing the Han River Railway and saw fissures on the superstructure.”

– Yes yes, a fissu...what?!

“The Electric potential between the bolt and the steel frames are quite high, so the bolt seemed to have undergone a great deal of corrosion. Another portion of the rain catch basin might fall, so it will probably need a closer inspection.”

-... Uh dear customer, could you explain in detail where that is located?

“It’s at the Southernmost tip of the Han River Railway, above the portion of the rails where subway trains headed towards Uijeongbu run.”

Jungwu revealed the location of where he saw the bolt in as much detail as he could. The representative asked for his name, so he obliged.

– Thank you, Mr. Jungwu Han.

“No problem.”

– Could you explain again one more time the cause?

“So basically, Electrons tend to move from metals with low potential to metals with high potential...”

Jungwu explained again why it was happening, but the man did not seem to comprehend it. It must be quite confusing for the representative as well since this was probably the first time someone had ever called to inform them that a superstructure located over the bridge was in danger due to rust. He would be happy as long as they didn't consider this a prank call.

‘I did my due diligence.’

Jungwu felt satisfied with the fact that he did his part as a citizen and exited the train at the transfer station.

*

Friday Morning at the KG Chemicals Central Laboratory.

The door to Lab 1 opened and the Research Supervisor Seungju Oh walked in.

“Attention”

A dozen researchers turned to look at him from their seats.

“Electronic Device Center needs 2 Senior researchers. They are going to get vacancies due to end of the year vacations. I want Junghi and Yoonjae to go. Just put up with it until the weekend.”

Two Senior Researchers stood up from their desks.

“And Team Leader Gilsoo Park has sent us a message. The Metal Lab is still recruiting new researchers, so they want someone from Lab 1 to apply...”

The researchers who were unrelated to the announcements cut off their attention and resumed focusing on their work.

Boyoung who sat close to the entrance smiled as she opened her bag, thinking she will get a chance to read a bunch of research articles today.

“[Boyounga](#).”

You add ‘a’ or ‘ya’ after the name to call out to somebody at equal or lower standing than you. It is similar to saying “hey”

Aieet is a sound of frustration in korean (or sound you make with your mouth as you hit something). It either shows dissatisfaction or a certain rebellious attitude, and if said by a girl is seen as a cute/adorable resistance.

“Aieet!”

But she had to quickly stand due to being called.

“Did you participate in Quasicrystal coating research this summer? The one commissioned by Korail.”

“Yes, Sunbae.”

“The city hall is searching for Researchers who had participated. Some sort of seminar is being held about Corrosion.”

“You want me to go? What about Team Leader Park?”

“You know he’s busy with the new project. Ah, and General Manager Kim of Rail Constructions has asked me to say hello.”

Since Boyoung had to leave soon, she closed her bag again.

“Take a few temps with you. You should show them how Sunbae handles work outside.”

“Should I?”

Boyoung’s eyes sparkled at Seungju’s instructions.

Chapter 12 – Old Steel (2)

“Oh my, who’s that?”

“Is he a new member of the Central Research Laboratory?”

Jungwu, who was busily typing away on his laptop while sitting on a bench located in the hallway, stopped to smile and acknowledge the members of other labs who were giving him weird looks.

‘Please don’t mind me and carry on.’

He was currently taking up a wall plug next to the vending machines to power his extremely outdated laptop. It was embarrassing, but it was better than staring off into space in the Temp employee’s office space. And it wasn’t like he could use Professor Chun’s personal Laboratory during the day.

Jungwu glanced towards the general direction of the offices for temporary hires on the other side of the hallway. No Senior Researcher came to fetch a temp this morning.

‘There is so much free time when there’s no task to work on.’

He refocused and resumed on the work at hand.

From Monday night until yesterday, Jungwu spent all of his free

time organizing and studying Professor Chun's research papers. He took Doctor Moon's advice to heart and focused on selecting a research topic that would be possible for him to gain recognition quickly for now. Next week's Research Ideas and Proposal Assessment would be the starting point of that.

‘Tat tat tat tat.’

While Jungwu was making a rough draft of the proposal paper, a head popped up from behind him.

“What are you working on?”

Jungwu froze. He had his guard lowered because he had not seen her on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. But now the large round eyes of the self-proclaimed rival was staring at him from a palm's distance away.

“Ooh, Synthetic Resins? Are you aiming for a project with the Fundamental Elements Laboratory?”

Boyoung was reading the document open on his laptop with great interest. Her smooth white cheeks were too close to his face, so he answered after moving his head away slightly.

“I am considering it.”

“What do you think, would you like an opinion from last year's winner?”

Boyoung's large non-double eyelid eyes seemed to burst with life.

"I'll gladly accept if it's free."

"Then I politely retract my offer."

Boyoung broke into a smile, and a small dimple softly appeared on her cheeks. Seeing her smile so sweetly, Jungwu couldn't help but instinctively feel his heart beginning to race.

'Snap awake. That's not a friendly smile. That's a trap!'

Jungwu firmly reminded himself that becoming involved and swept away by her pace would prove to be nothing but trouble, so he closed his laptop.

"Did you come to grab coffee from the vending machine?"

"No."

Jungwu gave her a questioning gaze. Boyoung hopped out from behind him and grinned as she told him.

"Pack your things. We need to go somewhere."

"Where to?"

“A good place.”

“Good only for Sunbae?”

Boyoung’s expression seemed to shout yes. Taking into consideration that Boyoung was the newest addition to the Lab 1 team, Jungwu guessed that it probably involved some sort of manual labor.

‘I thought it was strange that things were so quiet.’

Jungwu unplugged the power cable from the wall and placed his laptop in his bag. Boyoung watched quietly for a moment before commenting.

“Are the other temps still singling you out? Should I say something to them?”

“Don’t misunderstand. I came here because the office for temp is uncomfortable.”

“Aieet. I’ll go ahead and intervene.”

Boyoung headed towards the temp hire’s office.

“H...Hey, I said I’m fine!”

Jungwu threw the bag over his shoulder and chased after her. The issue with being singled out is best when solved personally.

“Sunbae...”

“Hoobae nims!”

Before he could stop her, Boyoung already yelled from the hallway into the office.

“Anyone want to go with me to the Seminar held at the City Hall? I got dispatched to the event.”

‘What?’

The moment Jungwu realized he was baited, he immediately stopped in his tracks.

‘I don’t want to get involved. Her ability to sweep people away with her pace is unnatural.’

The Temp Researcher’s office remained quiet despite her loud announcement. Because she didn’t select anyone by name, it appeared as though they were all quietly observing the situation.

“I guess everyone’s busy.”

All of them were busy preparing for the assessment with the deadline approaching. It was only natural that they would all wish to avoid doing support work as much as possible until the assessment was over.

Boyoung seemed to have caught onto their thoughts. She changed her tone, speaking as if she was going to leave, but raised her volume.

“I WAS going to give a few pointers on how I won 1st place to whoever who came to help out. But if you don’t need it, that’s fine too.”

Suddenly all the temps raised their heads.

“Well, just in case. First person to come gets to go! One, two...”

Even before Boyoung counted to three, six temp researchers jumped up from their seats. After a fierce struggle to get ahead, Gitae who managed to reach her first raised his hands.

“It’s me, I won!”

“Okay, rest are rejected.”

Gitae shouted “Yahoo!” and danced.

“Sunbae, can’t you take one more?”

“Until 3rd place!”

Jungwu who watched the chaos suddenly unfold before him didn’t know how to respond and continued to stare expressionlessly.

Boyoung who saw him smiled as she said,

“Parachuter ssi, you should consider yourself lucky. Not anyone can attend these kinds of seminars.”

“Since it’s a rare and valuable opportunity, may I yield my spot to one of the Temp Sunbaes?”

He took a jab hoping against hope, but Boyoung shook her head firmly.

“It’s too late. I already reported that you will be attending.

It hadn’t even been a second since he resolved to not get swept away by her, but he had already fallen to her schemes. Reminding himself to be more vigilant in the future, he stood before her.

Gitae who was dancing and wallowing in the envy of his peers stopped once Jungwu stood before him.

“Jungwu ssi is going too?”

“I guess so.”

Boyoung shouted “Let’s go!” and led the way. Gitae followed without another word, and Jungwu meekly followed suit.

‘Is it because I didn’t sleep much nowadays? I already feel exhausted.’

Jungwu shook his head in his mind.

He prayed that today wouldn’t drag on forever.

*

Three people walked out of the twin buildings with the gigantic KG Chemicals logo into the street.

Boyoung checked her cellphone as she said

“I called a taxi. They said it’ll arrive in 3 minutes.”

While they were waiting for the taxi, Gitae carefully and cautiously asked Jungwu

“Jungwu ssi, I didn’t see you this morning...”

“I was near the break room.”

“I see. I thought you were assigned to Project Lead Jung’s team.”

“The Lab 4 lead? I haven’t seen him since end of the weekly meeting.”

Jungwu shook his head, recalling the indignant face of Sangshik Jung.

“Strange. Sunghwan said that Jungwu ssi’s name was entered into the Lab 4 member list.”

“Really?”

“The revised food additive sample was accepted. Didn’t you hear?”

This was the first time he had heard of it, so Jungwu’s expression remained quizzical. Boyoung was also surprised to hear the news and inserted herself into the conversation.

“KG Foods accepted that? Really?”

Boyoung turned to look at Jungwu.

“How?”

“I uh...somehow I guess. There shouldn't have been any problem with my changes.”

Boyoung was put off by Jungwu's nonchalant attitude and pointed her finger accusingly at him.

“Wow, look at this guy, so full of confidence.”

“It's not confidence...”

“You have no idea how stubborn people at KG Foods are, do you? The fact that a single person was able to revise and save a team project rejected by the client is an amazing acc....”

When Boyoung found herself unintentionally praising Jungwu, she looked panicked for a moment. Her expression seemed to say ‘this is not what I had intended’ and she dragged on her word for a moment before her eyes locked on with Jungwu's.

“...Lab 4's Project leader's determination. Reattempting a project that had been rejected once, his brazen passion is amazing I should say.”

Jungwu couldn't tell if she was praising or insulting the leader.

“Oh right. We don't have time for this. Gitae ssi, this way.”

Boyoung must have felt embarrassed by making such a ridiculous excuse and hurriedly changed the topic.

“I’ll teach you the know-how to doing well on the Assessment. Self-confident Parachuter ssi probably doesn’t need the help.”

Boyoung, whose eyes were filled with nothing but competitive spirit, took Gitae and walked a bit of distance away.

‘Now that I think of it, she’s last year’s 1st place, and the other one is this year’s best.’

He was beginning to feel that two aces of the research center had begun to grow wary of him. Although he had no desire to compete with them.

He started to feel an ill premonition.

‘No way, we’re going to the City Hall. What could possibly go wrong?’

*

The Orange Taxi followed a one-way street and stopped along the way.

“Subject of Air purification Systems?”

“Setting the goal as a societal benefit over profitability made the crucial difference. Seoul has an incredible population density, as you know. [Yellow dust](#), micro dust, Aerosol molecules... Thank you, sir.”

Yellow Dust – Dust blown to Korea from China. Includes dust from the giant desert, but also the industrial smog from China.

Boyoung and Gitae continued to speak about last year's Assessment after they arrived and left the taxi. Jungwu wordlessly followed behind without interrupting them.

“When Professor Chun saw my proposed dust collection filter, he was astonished and said to me ‘it is a great move forward. The size of the molecules makes all the difference’. He was able to grasp the main point of my paper right away. It was very inspiring.”

“Sorry for interrupting you, but who is Professor Chun...?”

“Ah, Temporary hire Hoobae nim joined in the fall, so you probably don't know. There is a legendary researcher in front of whom even professor Yoonseok bows his head to. He's currently taking his sabbatical.”

Boyoung glanced at Jungwu meanwhile. Jungwu smiled and motioned for her to continue.

Boyoung turned her head with a ‘hmpf’ and resumed speaking about last year's assessment.

Jungwu was looking on the bright side, that it was better for them to be preoccupied speaking to each other than tormenting him, so he turned to look at the City Hall building.

It was a 15 story tall building located close to [Deoksugung Palace](#).

Deoksugung Palace is the residential palace of the last Korean dynasty, and was used until the 20th century. The last surviving prince, Seok Yi, of the Joseon Dynasty lived in this palace until the Korean government finally kicked the royal families out of the Palaces in 1979. The last prince of Joseon dynasty was allowed to return to Korea in 2009 as a part of Chonju's tourism campaign.

Deoksugung-gil is a road that goes around the Palace and nearby areas, and is famous for its stone walkway. It is listed as one of the finest hiking locations in Seoul

The traditional look of the Deoksugung-gil Path gave the annex of the City Hall an elegant and graceful atmosphere which contrasted nicely with the tall modern design of 'City of Seoul Southwest Gate Government Office Building'.

The information panel on the seminar was displayed just inside of the entrance of the office building.

[Facilities Planning and Public Infrastructure reinforcement and restoration Seminar / 2nd floor conference room.]

It was an esoteric seminar held by an esoteric department.

‘It’s probably not all that important since they included a 2nd year Researcher and temporary hires as participants.’

Either way, Jungwu was curious how a high-level discussion on maintenance of public structures was like.

“We’re almost there. Let’s go up.”

The self-praise and gossip about Professor Chun disguised under the pretext of ‘teaching the know-how to win’ finally ended, and Boyoung led the way with big strides.

Government Employees checking in visitors and participants were visible once on the 2nd floor.

“We are from KG Chemicals.”

Boyoung approached them and revealed her affiliation. The City Hall’s Government Employee stared at Boyoung’s face with an unreadable expression before asking

“Are you really the person in charge?”

“Yes, I am.”

She must have looked too young for the Government Employee to believe.

“No matter how I see it, you look like a student...”

Whether judging by appearance or height, Gitae looked more appropriate, so the Government Employee’s gaze naturally fell upon him. Gitae let out a fake cough, and Jungwu found it funny and had to stifle his laughter.

Boyoung took out her researcher ID and showed it to the employee.

“Project Leader Gilsoo Park was unable to attend. And I was the researcher who was 2nd in command for the Quasicrystal Coating project that we collaborated with Korail.”

“Ah...”

“[I rarely put on makeup](#) so many people make the same mistake. Thank you for saying I look young.”

Putting on makeup is a sign of maturity,

In literary korean literary device, saying a woman does not wear makeup is a type of indication that she is naturally very beautiful; even without the help of makeup, her skin is naturally pure, white, and youthful.

Boyoung bowed her head. Even Jungwu had felt the Government Employee’s shock from seeing Boyoung’s stiff and formal speech which contrasted with her extremely young appearance.

“KG Chemical is seat number 12.”

The Government Employee was unable to look away from Boyoung even as the name tag was handed over.

Boyoung sat at a large rectangular table inside of the conference room. Once she had her name tag around her neck, she turned to face Jungwu and Gitae.

“Please sit comfortably in the back.”

Jungwu sat down on the seat and asked Boyoung

“What project did you work on with Korail?”

“It was a project we did over the summer. We wanted to develop a new coating material that could withstand extreme corrosive environment. Something to spray over the paint.”

“A corrosion inhibitor?”

“Yes. It was a coating material that could be used on the rail and most of the bridge structure. And of course, Korail was highly satisfied.”

Boyoung made a V sign and then turned around. The sight of her taking documents out and preparing for seminar didn't make her

seem so young after all. She had the atmosphere of a proper researcher about her, so Jungwu doubted his eyes for a moment.

‘She’s serious when she has to be I guess.’

When Boyoung turned around to place her bag behind her, her eyes met Jungwu’s who was watching her.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

Jungwu couldn’t tell her that he was staring at her because she was being earnest, so he gave a fake cough. Boyoung grinned as if she understood his reasons.

“Unfortunately it was after the time Professor Chun had already left so I couldn’t hear any praises. But don’t think you can look down this project. The Chief Officer was quite satisfied, and I put a lot of effort into it to make it successful.”

This woman somehow relates everything back to Professor Chun. Let alone ‘look down upon’, Jungwu was honestly quite impressed. So he had to suppress his bitter smile

Chapter 13 – Old Steel (3)

After a moment,

The number of people in the conference room increased steadily. Jungwu glanced at few of the participant's titles and began to feel his heart race.

The Professor of Department of Architecture of a big name college, the Korail Head of Technology, representatives of Major corporations ranging from Construction, Shipping, Storage and Logistics... the room was filled with nothing but high ranking specialists in the field.

‘This place is so full of intellectuals.’

The fact that he was sharing and participating in a space with such academics and professionals filled Jungwu with a swelling sense of pride. He wished Chan was here, to show that his brother was participating and contributing to society like this.

‘And who said that being 5th place in class was a big deal.’

Jungwu felt a pang of envy for a ranking he had never achieved.

One of the Government employees walked to the center of the room.

The early 40s bespeckled man tapped on the mic to test the sound before beginning to speak.

“The seminar will begin shortly. Those of you not in the conference room, please make your way in and take your seat.”

Dozen or so experts in the field with participation rights sat around the tables in the center. With the exception of Boyoung who was most definitely the youngest of them all, the rest of the core participants looked to be in their forties or fifties.

“My name is Gichul Yang, I am the Official for Facilities Planning department, and I will be overseeing the discussion for this seminar. I would like to welcome and extend a thank you on behalf of the Mayor to participants of various companies and organizations for coming here.”

Starting with Gichul’s greetings, the Standing Advisor to the Urban Planning Bureau Professor Soogon Hwang continued with the briefing on the topic of the seminar.

“...Rust collapses bridges, makes storage space unusable, and rapidly wears out homes, cars, and fuel tanks...it is something akin to cancer...”

While listening to the briefing, Jungwu skimmed through the documents supplied for the seminar.

He realized that the scale of restoration work taking place within

the City of Seoul in a single year due to rust and the resulting expenditure was absolutely massive. And to combat this, there were many redundant preventative Structural Reinforcement constructions, application of Corrosion Inhibitors, and new layers of paint.

In other words, it was a market where Companies like Construction firms or KG Chemicals could generate a large profit.

“Next, we will present the comprehensive report on the current state and management of Han River Bridges.”

As soon as Gichul finished speaking, Head of the Bureau of Bridge Safety Sangseok Yi stood up.

“As you can see, of the 22 bridges standing above the Han River in Seoul, 8 are managed by external companies. We will cover the bridges in the order of their need for reinforcements.

Jungwu saw on the projected screen the same Han River Railway he had crossed this morning.

‘So that greenish paint was from Yujin Chemical.’

Yujin Chemical was as famous and well known as KG Chemicals. Since the report was on a competing company, he couldn’t help but pay attention to the detailed account on costs or effectiveness.

“We will open the floor for question and answer. Please feel free

to speak openly.”

The first one to speak up was from the School of Architecture, Structural Engineering Department Professor Yungtae Kang.

“Bureau Head Yi, are you going to apply Corrosion Inhibitor on just a few of the bridges and call it good again?”

“The budget has not changed from last year so we will do a similar level of reinforcement work as last year.”

“How unreasonable. Corrosive Inhibitor applied in a humid location can only last about a year or so. If the monsoon season lasts longer than expected, you can expect Jamsugyo Bridge to form rust right away. If you don’t even have enough budget to reinforce all the bridges, how can you expect to properly manage them?”

Jungwu stared at Professor Kang in surprise due to the latter’s confrontational attitude against the City hall from the very start. It would not be surprising if the Official directing the Seminar was currently sweating from his pointed question.

“I think it’s about time for a paradigm shift and start considering long term benefits. If we reinforce the bridges with a high strength Inhibitor, we won’t have to worry about them for another 30 years. If we take 30 years worth of expenditure into consideration, wouldn’t this be a far better investment? It would certainly reduce wasteful spending of tax dollars.”

“...The city will take all suggestions into consideration.”

“Especially that Han River Railway. I worry about it every time I look at it. Do you really think a bridge built in 1994 will be fine with just adding another layer of coating? And your excuses won't work anymore; I heard that something fell off today.”

Everyone's gaze gathered on the Korail representative after Professor Kang's accusations.

“I am Korail's Head of Technologies, Daechul Kim. The accident this morning was resolved without problem. There was no injury.”

“And the cause?”

“Rather than a structural failure, we have come to the determination that it was caused by the decrease in durability which resulted due to the increase in the rail throughput over the years. And the Han River Railway in particular was chosen as the test site for the newly developed Corrosion Inhibitor made in collaboration with KG Chemicals...”

As soon as the new Inhibitor was mentioned, Boyoung's eyes began to sparkle.

“Head Kim, that's not my point. My problem is, how can the question of corrosion be solved by simply applying a bunch of coating.”

“That’s...”

“I am Researcher Boyoung with KG Chemicals. I’ll be explaining that part.”

Boyoung took to the mic and intervened. A lot of people in the room began to murmur when such a young woman spoke up in the middle of the discussion.

“Please go ahead.”

Professor Kang said to Boyoung, with a face full of confidence that he could refute anything she had to say.

‘Wow, so much pressure.’

Jungwu felt anxious from just watching the proceedings. After seeing Professor Kang shut up the Government Official as well as Representative of Korail one after the other, he couldn’t help but be worried for Boyoung.

Boyoung held up her papers.

“The new Corrosion inhibitor material we developed is a quasicrystal coating that is more slippery than Teflon and harder than stainless steel. The minimum life expectancy is not one but three years, and the material cost and cost of manufacture is half. Unlike what Professor Kang was worried about, we believe that we can significantly reduce the total cost with the new material.”

“Quasicrystal? That’s the first I’ve heard of it. And I don’t even know if it’s true or...”

“Yes, it’s true.”

Boyoung’s timing for cutting off Professor Kang’s mocking words was on point.

“KG Chemicals’ Central Research Laboratory’s experts have personally conducted and verified the effectiveness of this material. Furthermore, this material is already being used in half of the government structures after being accepted by the US Department of Defense Corrosion Management Bureau.”

Boyoung smiled sweetly for a moment before she dealt the final blow with an unforgettable closure.

“In other words, the compound we created through a chemical process is as reliable as a steel based product.”

Professor Kang, who was unable to respond to her, stopped giving his opinion. The Korail head of Technologies gave Boyoung a light bow to express his gratitude

Once she was done expressing herself, the Government Official, the Construction & Shipping Company representatives, and the representatives of other organizations present showed great interest and began to look through the reference material.

“Ah well.”

Boyoung gave a slight cough and shrugged before looking over to Jungwu.

‘How was I’ her eyes seem to say.

Jungwu gave her a quiet applause.

‘She’s really good. She’s not intimidated being in the midst of all these experts.’

Boyoung was a member of Lab 1, a lab full of only aces. Unlike Jungwu, she had reached her position by studying diligently and accumulating her knowledge of chemistry slowly over time. So it was only natural that her experience and knowledge of chemicals was on an extraordinary level. Gitae who sat next to Jungwu had been giving her an incredulous look the entire time she was speaking.

The Officer in charge of directing the Seminar began to speak.

“If there is nothing else to be added, then we’ll move on to the next point...”

“Wait.”

Just when it seemed like the conversation about the Han River Railway was about to be over with Boyoung coming out on top, someone picked up their mic.

“It’s just that the issue of Railway came up.”

A man in mid-forties wearing an elegant suit took a look around the conference room. Jungwu checked his nametag and flinched.

Yujin Chemical Head of Research Division

Unlike KG Chemicals which sent just a regular researcher, the Competitor had sent someone quite high ranked to the Seminar.

“My name is Jaegil Yoon. Nice to see you again, Professor Kang. You argued with me last year, and you argued with a pretty lady this year. What a fighter.”

Professor Kang looked away seemingly displeased.

Jaegil’s one comment had instantly captured the attention of everyone in the room. He followed the momentum and pointed to the Projected image and said,

“Please check the prepared image. Bureau Head Yi, if you please.”

The Slideshow showed various unsightly images of rusted railways and support beams, as well as the steel beams of the

overpass.

“This was a year ago. And these are images after our Yujin Chemicals removed all the rust and applied a fresh layer of paint, one year after.”

Han River Railway appeared on the screen. The images showed a clean looking bridge with green colored paint coating. Looking at the images, Jaegil began

“As you can see, the paint is completely preventing rusting. And what about the insides? According to a thorough test conducted by Yujin Chemical, of the tens of thousands of rivets on the bridge, only 0.1% were loosened, none of them were found to be rusted.”

Jaegil turned his gaze to Korail’s Head of Technology.

“And that was despite the repeated daily heavy Metropolitan rail use, vibrations and impact. I want to ask you, Head of Technology. Applying a new coating on a railway in perfect condition, isn’t that a waste of your budget?”

“This is for the sake of safety, so we do not consider this level of expenditure to be wasteful.”

“Even if the bridge received a higher safety evaluation score than any other bridge?”

Head of Technology Daechul was unable to respond.

“And pretty lady over there.”

Boyoung’s eyebrows began to twitch when Jaegil continued to call her by the title of ‘[lady](#)’.

Lady is “Agassi” in korean, and usually is meant to be a polite term to refer to a young lady. But it could also mean child and be used as a way to look down on someone.

“You mentioned American Department of Defense Corrosion Management Bureau earlier. Do you know the famous anecdote that came out from there?”

“I...no, not really.”

Boyoung was forced to shake her head.

“So you weren’t even aware of the famous tale of the symbol of New York, the metallic structure ‘Statue of Liberty’, that it was once in danger of collapsing due to rust?”

Jaegil’s ability to point out flaws in Boyoung’s knowledge and reveal her weakness was not only masterful, but it was also highly effective in giving himself the superior position in the debate and dominate the discussion.

“The method used by the collective effort of the world’s most prominent corrosion experts to remove and protect the Statue of Liberty from rust; We have used the same method on the Han

River Railway through a major construction project, and the Railway has operated without any problems until now.”

Jaegil used a line of logic Boyoung would be unable to refute and continued to speak.

The Zinc paint used by Yujin Chemical was originally developed by NASA, and we purchased special rights to replicate it. Its effectiveness was confirmed in humid and salty environment such as Hawaii. Thanks to its cost effectiveness, we have begun receiving many orders from buyers.”

The personnel in the conference room now began to look up the Yujin Chemical’s reference material with great interest.

“But...”

Boyoung was unable to make a proper response. She had only researched and studied articles related to her coating material; she had not prepared to respond to cost/benefit and comparative analysis for competitor’s products.

“Quasicrystal Coating. It’s great. It’s cheap. But it’s not the right fit for Han River Railway. The Reinforcement on this bridge is already underway, and it was already decided that the location would require total care from a specialization company like Yujin Chemical.”

The debate that began with Professor Yungtae now seemed like it

would soon devolve into a battle of will between two competing corporations, the Official in charge of the Seminar picked up his Mic.

“Please remain calm and keep to a constructive criticism.”

“You mentioned constructive discussions so I have been wondering. Why did KG Chemical send an inexperienced researcher to such an important gathering? Shouldn’t they have minimally sent someone of an executive position or higher?”

“How rude.”

“If you say speaking the truth is rude, then I have nothing to say.”

Boyoung’s round eyes became even rounder when Jaegil raised both of his hands to gesture the sign for surrendering.

Jaegil displayed overwhelming confidence throughout the interaction. Jungwu couldn’t help but be impressed by Jaegil’s demonstration of his debate experience and knowledge

‘Since this involves understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of competitor’s products, it’s really merciless.’

Because of this, Boyoung’s eyes were filled with rage that couldn’t be compared to the time she had leered at him.

‘What can she do though. It’s not like the other side is wrong... mmm?’

Jungwu who was looking at the image of Han River Railway had to swallow back a gasp.

He noticed that the unfamiliar chemical formulas and the constellations of the atoms had appeared before him like a hologram.

The appearance of the small galaxy floating in the Conference room was not all that different from the time in End of the Week Meeting. And this time, he noticed a very interesting compound among the constellations.

‘What should I do?’

Jungwu scratched his chin as he watched Boyoung tremble with her fist held tightly under the desk. It wasn’t like this Seminar was meant to determine winners or losers, but Boyoung’s loss was KG Chemicals’ loss.

‘Aw what the hell.’

Jungwu raised his hands.

“Mr. Official, I have a question.”

Chapter 14 – Old Steel (4)

Official Yang turned to face Jungwu for a moment before he motioned his hands for Jungwu to continue.

“Is the responsibility for maintaining Han River Railway with the City, or with Korail?”

“Why are you asking that question?”

“That picture right there.”

Jungwu pointed at the slide where the Han River Railway was zoomed in on a specific location.

“I was just wondering who would be responsible for wiping off pigeon poo if it were to fall on the rail.”

Perhaps due to asking such a laymen question, many of the participants in the room began to grin.

Boyoung turned around in shock and stared at him, but before she could complain demanding to know what he was up to, Jungwu lifted up his hands to tell her to calm down.

“Mmm...Uh...I don’t see anything like a Pigeon poo anywhere.”

“There is.”

“Where?”

Jungwu watched the illusion of the atomic star formations floating in the air gather into a bundle and form a constellation which resembled a pigeon. He resumed speaking.

“That flapping atom... I mean if I look at that portion where there is a dent from a high level of corrosion, I can deduce what happened. It’s pigeon poo that pierced through even Yujin Chemical’s paint.”

Jungwu walked up towards the screen and pointed at a spot. Official Yang discovered a very faint fingernail-sized dent at the corner of the screen and asked Jungwu with a quizzical look.

“How did you notice it?”

“It’s a guess grounded in Chemistry. I am a Chemist.”

Official Yang must have accepted his explanation for now because he answered Jungwu’s original question.

“The portion where the subway trains pass are maintained by Korail. There are too many electrical lines running above the rails that are off limits to most people. The City of Seoul only provides monetary support. But what is the purpose of asking this question?”

“That is unless it rains, no one can clean up that poo. Even if you put a powerful paint over it, it can’t suppress Steel’s inherent nature.”

“Inherent nature?”

“It’s undying love and desire to bond with Oxygen. A love not even paint can eliminate.”

Several people in the room snickered when Jungwu began to anthropomorphize the nature of atoms as if he was telling them a fairy tale. Jaegil was one of them.

“What a humorous young man.”

Since Jungwu said something negative about Yujin Chemical’s paint, Jaegil picked up the mic right away.

“Pigeon poo? Do you really think we can’t prepare ahead of time for such things? The dents around the size of the one you see on the screen are already accounted for, so we apply three layers.”

“There are places with three layers, but there are also places with less.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’ve seen it.”

Jungwu recalled the yellowish green surface of the steel he had seen this morning as he continued with his explanations.

“The place where the bolt is meeting the steel. The place where the nail meets the frame, there is no paint there at all.”

“Isn’t it impossible to put paint there anyway?”

“Of course. That’s why it’s inevitable that there are holes in Yujin Chemical’s Total Care solution. Are bolts not a part of the bridge structure?”

Jaegil scoffed.

“We have spent over a day investigating just the rivets and the bolts alone. How can you possibly know anything about them when you have never seen it in detail?”

“I saw them in passing.”

“Liar.”

Jungwu started to feel a little stuck as he looked at someone who didn’t want to accept anything he had to say.

‘How do I solve this problem?’

Jungwu was thinking carefully about how to approach the issue when his eyes focused in on Jaegil's chin.

Perhaps due to being able to see the various constellations of randomly mixed chemical compounds overlaid with reality, Jungwu was able to instinctively read what was on his chin.

“I suppose you drank too much last night.”

“What?”

Jaegil's expression changed to that of disbelief. Jungwu answered right away.

“You have a bit of vomit on your chin.”

Jaegil hurriedly wiped his chin, then gave Jungwu a withering look.

“Why are you saying such baseless accusations, friend?”

“I can see a mixture of Ethyl Alcohol and Bisabolene. The aroma seems very high class. You must have had something expensive.”

Jaegil gave Jungwu a menacing look.

“This is a joke, right?”

“It’s not a joke. Wait... Citric Acid and Ascorbic Acid is there too. Wow, Sour. You had Orange or Lemon with your drink? A fruit with high proof alcohol. You’ll ruin your stomach like that.”

Jaegil was starting to look shocked. Even if someone could randomly guess the fact that he had had a drink, it was impossible to pick out the exact components down to the molecules like that. The way Jungwu spoke was as if he could see individual molecules with his naked eye; an impossible feat. Therefore Jungwu’s speech must have been made possible due to his confidence in his knowledge of Chemistry.

“Are you looking down on me?”

“No, not at all. I’m just worried for you.”

Jaegil was starting to become angry, and he began to shout at Jungwu.

“How can you possibly know all that?”

“Well. I guess it’s the same way I knew what happened at the Han River Railway when I passed by after the Superstructure collapsed onto the rails this morning. Are you aware that when two metals of different elements are in contact for extended periods of time, they form rust?”

“You think I wouldn’t know what Galvanic Corrosion is?!”

“So you do know.”

“That’s common knowledge!”

Jaegil became increasingly irritated the longer this conversation dragged on and asked in anger

“So what? How can you possibly prove that a perfectly intact nail has formed rust with a passing eye witness testimony?”

“Some bolts seemed to have a subtle difference in composition. A rough estimate of the difference in electrical potential would be about 0.1 volts. If it were to progress steadily, it would probably last a few more decades. But in strong winds and thunderstorms...”

“Don’t try to be funny.”

“I don’t have a talent for comedy, how unexpected. When I make a bad joke, my mother would sometimes throw her ladle at me. I even have a scar from when I was younger when I got hit in the wrong place.”

Jungwu lowered his head to show the back of his head, and Jaegil who managed to keep his anger more or less contained until this point became bright red in the face.

“You mother...”

Jaegil who had been confident and aloof until now began to swear, and as a response, Professor Kang who was off to the side covered his mouth to try and stifle his laughter.

‘This should be enough.’

Jungwu saw that the image of Star Constellations had begun to fade and so he concluded by saying

“That’s the extent of my comment. Official, May I return to my seat?”

“By all means.”

Jungwu’s eyes locked with Boyoung’s worried eyes on his way back. She asked him in a whisper,

“Why did you do that?”

“Don’t worry. I only told them the truth.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Once Jungwu sat down, Boyoung made an expression showing that she was trying to calm her anxious heart.

“You, stop!”

There was no way Jaegil would let Jungwu go without a fight after everything that happened.

“You’re just going say whatever you want and then leave?”

“Please calm down and stay on topic please.”

The Director of the Seminar picked up his mic and requested that emotional arguments be kept to a minimum.

Jungwu gestured towards Jaegil.

“There’s no way you would accept anything I have to say, so I have nothing more to add.”

“What, are you saying you have [Mongolian level of hawk eye](#)? What is your affiliation?”

There is an urban myth that Mongolians have an absurdly good eyesight (as much as 20/8 acuity). It is an urban myth for the most part, but of course, there are exceptional individuals.

“I am Jungwu Han, Intern at KG Chemicals.”

“I...In...Intern!!”

Jaegil shouted loudly when he found out that he had been had by just an intern.

Jungwu who already didn't have anything to say shut his mouth when Jaegil responded viciously. Even if he were to explain the exact phenomena taking place, it was useless if it was not understood.

‘Communication is reciprocal.’

Whatever happened, Jungwu was just satisfied that it didn't end with Boyoung and KG Chemicals being looked down upon.

“Stop, stop!”

Official Yang raised his hands.

“Jaegil Yoon, Head of Research Division, please avoid speaking from this point forward. Will a representative of Dongho Construction please provide a comment?”

There were more structures in the city of Seoul than just the Han River Railway, so the discussion of the seminar moved onto other areas of the city.

When Jungwu made his way back to his seat, Gitae asked him with a face drained of color.

“Jungwu Ssi, do you have any idea who you just angered?”

“He’s the Head of Research of Yujin Chemicals.”

“He is a professor who holds massive influence in the community. Even if he’s a part of a competing company, there is nothing good that can come from creating a bad relationship.”

“Is that so?”

Jungwu had no plans on accumulating renown among Chemists so he didn’t take it all that seriously. Gitae was even more shocked by Jungwu’s lack of response and shook his head.

Boyoung stole glances at Jungwu and quickly turned her head when he turned to look at her.

The seminar which took place in a conference room of the City hall ended around 2 pm. The main topic on everyone’s mouths was that ‘Jaegil Yoon lost his cool during a debate with a KG Chemical’s Intern’.

“Parachuter ssi.”

Boyoung walked up to Jungwu after packing her bag.

“Is this why you followed me here?”

“I didn’t follow you. You brought me here.”

“Same thing.”

Once Jungwu stood up, Boyoung had to look up because Jungwu was about a head taller.

“You did it again. You’re just like Professor Chun. I’m so jealous, really.”

“Am I really that similar?”

“Very. Do you have any idea how much I wanted to pick up that kind of chemistry laced speech pattern?”

As Jungwu continued to hear more and more about Professor Chun, he began to feel a sense of familiarity.

‘I’m starting to want to meet him at least once.’

Boyoung hesitated for a moment before she looked away as if gazing at a distant mountain as she said,

“I’ll keep in mind that you have protected KG Chemical’s image.”

Jungwu couldn’t help but grin at her squeamish way of

expressing something that resembled a praise.

—

“So humiliating.”

Jaegil sighed as he watched two people in the distance converse while laughing.

KG Chemicals: A bitter rival company who maintained the number 1 position in the country. Yujin Chemical had been delegated to second place each time with a minuscule difference, so it was a company he particularly did not want to lose against.

But he had embarrassed himself at the seminar today. And on the subject of reinforcement at that, which was Yujin Chemical's main specialization.

‘Zzzt’

The cellphone in Jaegil's pocket rang while he was trying hard to calm his raging heart.

“Yes, what?”

– Sir, we have a problem

“What is it?”

The person on the phone continued carefully after sensing the irritation in his voice.

– Uh...20 minutes ago there was another accident when another part of the bridge fell.

“What?!”

Jaegil stood up alarmed.

– There were no injuries, but two cars were damaged under the bridge as they were passing by when it fell. And now there are articles about it.

“Damn it! After all that...”

It was an event that could forever ruin the reputation of Yujin Chemical’s Total Care System.

“What are we supposed to say to Korail now? They already announced that they plan on using the newly developed coating rather than our paint. Get the Safety Inspection team right away!”

– We also heard something strange. The Seoul Metro Customer Service center has informed us that a passenger called this morning to warn that this would happen. The location the

passenger pointed out matches the location where the collapse has occurred.

“What do you mean? He predicted the exact location...?”

– We took down his contact information...

“Give me his number. And have the mobile research center on standby.”

Jaegil entered the phone number right away and began a call.

The phone rang, and the call was picked up on the other side.

– Hello?

“Ah, pardon me. My name is Jaegil Yoon, the Head of Research of Yujin Chemicals.”

– Um. Why?

“Excuse me? What do you mean...?”

Jungwu walked up to Jaegil while still speaking into the phone.

“I mean, why did you call me on the phone?”

“I heard that you had called earlier to warn about the Han River...”

Jaegil froze in the middle of speaking.

“Y...Y...You!”

“You sure have an interesting personality. Why would you call instead of just saying it in person? I know we had an awkward interaction during the seminar but...”

Jaegil began to suspect that Jungwu, the intern from KG Chemicals, was right about everything and felt like he was about to go mad.

“Why did you call me?”

Jaegil couldn't do anything but stare wordlessly with his mouth hanging open. This whole situation was ridiculous, and he already had a grudge against Jungwu, not to mention that it was difficult to believe.

“Oh yeah, how did you get my number anyway?”

Jungwu stared quizzically at Jaegil who did not respond.

“Parachuter ssi.”

Boyoung walked up to Jungwu from behind.

“Why are you standing around instead of leaving?”

“Head Researcher Yoon is calling me.”

Boyoung asked quietly

“Calling you? To fight? Should I go help you beat him up?”

“No, I don’t think... what? Why would you beat people up?”

“I mean, that professor. He looks like he has a nasty personality, right?”

“He might hear you.”

Jaegil, who finally snapped out of it, asked Jungwu

“You said your name was Jungwu Han?”

“Yes.”

“Come see me.”

Chapter 15 – Old Steel (5)

Immediately upon exiting out of the Government Office Building, Jaegil explained in detail the accident that his secretary had alerted him about.

Jungwu was shocked to hear that the gutters he had seen this morning had in fact collapsed.

“Could you please come with us? I have an urgent request to make.”

Jungwu frowned, looking troubled.

“Well...”

Jungwu glanced at Boyoung and Gitae who watched with curiosity from afar, then shook his head.

“I am still on the clock, and I am not finished with my other duties.”

“If it causes disturbance or interruption to your duties, I will compensate for the time lost. The Research vehicle just arrived as well.”

Jungwu couldn't help but be interested in what the man had to say.

“Compensate?”

“I will provide research consultation fee. I am an acquaintance with KG Chemical’s Central Research Laboratory’s Chair, so I am confident that I will be able to get his approval.”

The fact that such a stubborn man changed his attitude in such a short time could only mean that the accident was very serious.

Jungwu wasn’t sure exactly what ‘research consultation’ was, but he guessed that it was like working part time for a bit of extra cash on the side.

‘I am running dangerously low on funds right now. Wait, how much is he paying for consultation fee?’

Jungwu asked Jaegil to wait a moment and walked over to Boyoung. Boyoung’s expression was full of curiosity as she asked

“What were you two talking about?”

“He asked for help.”

“Right now? With what?”

“There was an accident at the Han River Railway, and they want to get my opinion.”

Gitae couldn't believe his ears.

“J...Jungwu ssi's opinion?”

The fact that one of the key executives of Yujin Chemical was asking a KG Chemicals' intern for an opinion in of itself was a major incident. When Gitae looked over and saw Jaegil's impatient and anxious state, he didn't have anything else to say. And the fact that Jungwu's expression showed disinterest made chills crawl up Gitae's spine.

Jungwu asked Boyoung

“Until when do we need to return?”

“You only need to return by the time your shift ends.”

“Then should I accept his offer? He offered to contact the Central Laboratory on my behalf, and the ride is on the way.”

“Of course you should. Han River Railway is an important structure for KG Chemicals as well. We are supposed to provide assistance with resolving any relevant issues in order for us to continue doing business with Korail next year.”

Boyoung then moved right next to Jungwu as she continued.

“And I need to stick with you in order to chaperone Parachuter ssi.”

“I’m fine. I’m not a three year old.”

“My my, it’s only been 5 days since you’ve been hired. A Sunbae must look after an intern.”

Jungwu saw through her ‘caring Sunbae’ act and knew she just wanted to tag along. Jungwu smirked as he said to her

“Since when were you such a considerate Sunbae? Why did I never notice it before?”

Boyoung poked his side and whispered, “Shh just play along.” She must have felt embarrassed.

Meanwhile, an oversized white bus arrived and parked in front of the Government Office Building. The bus had communication device installed on the roof, and it was readily apparent that it was a vehicle designed to fulfill a purpose.

Gitae’s eyes widened.

“Hey, that’s Yujin Chemical’s Mobile Research Lab! Something serious must have happened.”

It was a rare opportunity to be able to see a competitor’s cutting

edge equipment, so Gitae moved closer to Jungwu and said

“Jungwu ssi. Can you ask if they have some extra room in the...”

Once Jaegil shouted “Let’s go!” from in front of the bus, Jungwu didn’t listen to Gitae until the end and began running to the bus.

“Ah, Gitae ssi.”

Boyoung addressed Gitae.

“Please go back and report to Sunbae Oh that the seminar went well. And let him know that I’ll give him a detailed report when I get back.”

“Sunbae, do you think you could...”

“Parachuter ssi, wait for me!”

Gitae’s shoulders dropped when Boyoung didn’t finish hearing him out and ran off after Jungwu.

*

Choo-

The door to the oversized bus opened and Jaegil climbed in first,

motioning to Jungwu and Boyoung.

“Come on in.”

Jungwu stepped onboard to the specialized bus which had been hermetically sealed and couldn't help but be astonished.

‘I didn't know such a bus existed.’

The interior was filled to the brim with experimental tools and machinery, giving the impression of a proper research laboratory. Jungwu looked at the expensive equipment stationed all over the place as he made his way deeper into the bus. Then he made eye contact with a woman in her early thirties sitting at one of the seats.

“Hello”

He greeted her in reflex, but the woman's gaze was rather cold.

“Who are these outsiders, sir?”

“Oh, Project Lead Ju. These are people who will help us with the incident. They're from KG Chemicals.”

“KG Chemicals?”

The woman looked at Jaegil with a look of astonishment. Yujin Chemical just took a major hit to their reputation, so she couldn't figure out why he would be bringing people from a rival company at this time.

“Jungwu Han Ssi. This is Yujin Chemical's Total Care's Project Lead, Hana Ju.”

Jungwu and Boyoung who stood behind him bowed deeply to greet her, but she turned away to check the monitors instead.

“Project Lead Ju, time is of the essence, so start by putting the Han River Railway's files on the screen.”

The monitor showed the safety inspection results taken from last year October. Hana sorted through the X-ray photos of the steel structure until she found one that corresponded to the area where the gutter from the superstructure had fallen.

“1 40 PM, A bolt came loose and the gutter fell towards the Gangbyeonbuk-ro Highway. The length of the gutter was about 10 meters, and the cause is thought to be that the gutter couldn't sustain its weight once the bolt had fallen off.

Jaegil checked the metal stress map the durability chart before turning to Jungwu and asking

“Is this the same place you saw in the morning?”

“I am not sure. Don’t you have any regular photos? Higher res ones if possible.”

Hana turned to look at Jungwu when he made the request.

“What can you possibly find out from checking a live photo?”

“I just need to visually confirm it.”

Hana shifted her gaze to Jaegil as if to ask ‘who is this guy’.

“Do it. He’s got an uncanny ability.”

And so the high-resolution photos were placed on the screen.

Jungwu checked the screen closely until he noticed the bolt where the free Electrons had run amok and nodded.

“This part. I don’t know how old these photos are, but the corrosion is a lot less severe than when I saw them this morning.”

“Corrosion? The reason why the gutter fell was because it couldn’t handle the increased vibration and stress from the rise in rail usage.”

“How can that be? It’s not that bad in this photo, but the bolt was in a really bad shape.”

“Look. Check the durability charts.”

Jungwu didn't want to argue with her because of her strict personality.

“I guess you are an expert on bridges?”

“It is as you can see. And you?”

“I'm not an expert on the field per se.”

Hana looked like she wouldn't believe anything Jungwu had to say. And Jaegil didn't say anything as if he wanted Jungwu to convince her on his own.

‘I knew it. Trying to talk about chemistry is hard.’

Jungwu glanced at Jaegil and recalled the method he had used during the seminar. Jungwu was starting to become more confident.

‘Here goes nothing.’

Jungwu narrowed his eyes and scanned Hana's face. He saw common cosmetic components, food particles, bread crumbs, and evidence of coffee. And finally, a peculiar molecular structure. It was someone else's saliva.

“I guess you like kisses.”

“Excuse me?”

Jungwu saw the particles arrange itself into a cute form akin to a cat, complete with legs and a tail. Jungwu watched the image lick its front paw before adding

“You have a lot of cat saliva on your lips and cheeks.

Hana’s expression changed as she quickly covered her cheeks. But no matter how she thought of it, there was no way that this man could have known that she had buried her face in Kiki and Toto’s fur at the lobby right before work.

“Don’t randomly guess other people’s private lives.”

She was even more on guard than usual because this was a man who had claimed there was a flaw in her company’s Total Care System.

“You must have two cats. Their Lysozyme enzyme has subtle differences. One of them seems to have been livelier than the other. Are their personalities like that as well?”

“I...”

Hana gave Jungwu an extremely confused look.

“It’s a deduction based on chemistry and perception. Something like that.”

Once it appeared that Hana has somehow accepted Jungwu’s completely baseless deduction, Jaegil couldn’t help but grin. He even wondered if there was any chemist out there that wouldn’t be convinced with Jungwu’s elegant chemical insight.

“Project Lead Ju, I thought you said you lived alone.”

Hana was flustered that Jaegil was giving her a look of sorrow as if he was pitying the 33-year-old unmarried single woman who only shared kisses with her cats.

“Please don’t misunderstand, sir.”

“I won’t. It’s just, I didn’t expect cats.”

Hana swallowed back her sigh. She simply loved working more than the company of a man, but anything she now says would probably sound like a desperate attempt to conceal her loneliness.

“That’s a misunderstanding.”

“Ah, sorry sorry.”

Hana's face turned bright red due to having the detail of her personal life she did not want to share be revealed to her superior. She glared at Jungwu and asked

“How did you know?”

“I don't think there is a need for me to reveal my chemical know-hows to a project lead of a competitor. Going back to that bridge...”

While Hana was off guard for a moment, Jungwu quickly spoke.

“I am not saying that the inspection from Yujin Chemical is flawed. It's a plausible story based on what happened.”

Jungwu tried to explain without using intuition and his ability to see individual molecules, trying to be as down to earth as he can. He tried to draw out his explanation based on the knowledge of chemistry he had.

“You can't guarantee that you will make a delicious meal just because you have excellent ingredients. The flavor can change from cook to cook depending on how the ingredients are prepared and how long the food is heated. Just because the formulas and data look good, does that guarantee a perfect structure? Let me use the mouse for a sec.”

Jungwu accepted the mouse from Hana and began to look through the information on the screen.

“From what I had seen this morning, there was a large discrepancy between the material used in the bolts for the gutter. Some had high voltage difference, some had lower. Obviously, the ones with the higher voltage difference had a greater degree of corrosion.”

All the bolts looked identical from the outside.

“There should be an easy way to spot the problem, even for a lay person.”

Jungwu searched through the photos for a while before expanding a picture as large as it could grow and pointed using the mouse’s pointer on the screen.

“The chemical reaction I detected is due to this. The fact that not all bolts were made of the same material.”

Two slightly different colored bolts came into view.

“Here you go.”

Chapter 16 – Old Steel (6)

Hana's expression changed when she saw the screen. With a completely serious look, she turned to face Jaegil.

“Could the difference in color be caused by spoiling?”

Jaegil was watching the screen as well, so he was able to answer right away.

“It not possible for a bridge of this class to have bolts whose surface can wear off from corrosion. Especially after we applied our coating solution this year.”

“That's true. Which means...”

Hana and Jaegil answered nearly at the same time.

“There was a problem with the manufacturing of the bolts...”

“There were defective bolts with incorrect metallic composition.”

Hana began to work away at the keyboards to find out which company had provided the bolts, and Jaegil called the Head of Technology at Korail.

Boyoung noticed that the two of them were busy and tapped on

Jungwu's shoulders.

“Parachuter ssi.”

“What?”

“Did you identify the cause?”

“I already found the cause in the morning. They've only come to accept it now.”

“Che, show off.”

Jungwu smiled, thinking that the only thing now remaining was to work out a consultation fee. Boyoung, who was abnormally quiet after getting on the bus, stood next to Jungwu and watched Hana and Jaegil work.

5 minutes later

Jungwu became tired of waiting and asked Boyoung,

“About Professor Chun. What kind of work did he typically do around the research center?”

“You know, this and that.”

“This and that?”

“He would make shocking proclamations during the end of the week meetings and surprise the Project leads, and go around checking on all the Seniors’ resear... Ah, if you’re curious then Parachuter ssi should tell me a secret as well.”

“I’ll just pretend I never asked.”

“But you already heard everything!”

Just then, Jaegil suddenly spoke loudly during his phonecall.

“Press conference?!”

He covered the receiver with his hands and whispered with a shocked expression.

“We have found the cause and are in the middle of analysis. If we want to do a thorough examination, we need a minimum of two weeks to produce any report. It’s not possible to...”

Jaegil then turned around to look at Jungwu before continuing.

“...Please hold on for a moment. Jungwu ssi, would you be able to recognize problematic bolts by sight?”

“Maybe.”

“How much time would it take?”

“Probably about the time it takes to walk across the bridge by feet? About 30 to 40 minutes?”

Hana suddenly froze and stopped typing. Someone was making plans to spend two weeks of analysis and inspection, and he declared he could do it in 30 minutes. Jaegil also stifled a groan before replying to his cellphone.

“I will head there now. I will meet you at the entrance, Sir.”

Jaegil turned to look at Jungwu after ending the call.

“Jungwu ssi, would you please come with us to the Yongsan station?”

Jungwu turned to check with Boyoung. Boyoung realized that things were getting serious when she heard the mention of a press conference and gulped.

“It’s okay. We’ve already notified the Central Research Laboratory.”

Once Boyoung expressed her approval, Jungwu asked Jaegil

“But isn’t finding the problem bolts a separate issue from consulting?”

“If all goes well, we will pay you 10% of Total Care Team’s two week’s worth of budget.”

Consulting fee and now a percentage of the team’s budget. But haggling is the most basic of the basics of negotiation.

“Hmm but... It’s cold, and walking above the Han River at night might get me ill.”

“15%. Considering that we are allocating our budget to an outsider, we have already given you the best possible compensation.”

He didn’t know how much he was being offered, but Jungwu could imagine that Jaegil was feeling a bit annoyed. Jungwu nodded. Boyoung was here as well so he couldn’t ask ‘exactly how much are you offering to pay me?’. He would look desperate.

“Let’s go.”

“If we head to the Yongsan Station, we will be able to access Han River Railway with the help of the Korail Inspection team. I’ve been told that some reporters from cable companies are present on site. They may request interviews.”

“Interview?”

Before the Yongsan Station entrance.

There were dozens of reporters standing on top of the stairs before the partition. The parked reporter's vehicles weren't from any of the major 8 o'clock news stations, but the number of vehicles from smaller news made this place look like a scene of a major accident.

Jungwu was watching the scene outside when he was surprised by the sudden appearance of Boyoung's head which popped up from underneath.

"Wow, it's true. Parachuter ssi, you might even appear on TV. Not even other Sunbaes from Lab 1 have made an appearance yet."

Jungwu asked Boyoung nervously after listening to her exclamation.

"I can't cause problems for KG Chemicals, right?"

"Why are you asking something so obvious? Professor Chun was on TV a bunch of times, and he was totally awesome. Each time with so much gusto!"

'Gusto?'

Even now he was being compared to the professor.

“Jungwu ssi, let’s get going.”

Jungwu approached the door upon Jaegil’s suggestion.

‘Tssst-’

The Officials approached him as soon as he got off the bus. Among them, he noticed the Government Officials and Korail employees he had met earlier at the seminar.

“Sir Official, don’t you know how many bridges we maintain at a loss? Why are you applying so much pressure on us?”

“I couldn’t help it; the Mayor is paying close attention to the issue. The term has just begun so the Mayor is being sensitive to any major event. And I heard from the head that the solution was found?”

“Not by my merit, but this man.”

Gichul turned to look at Jungwu. He realized that it was the same young man who had been the target of Jaegil’s verbal abuse during the seminar, so Gichul couldn’t help but be surprised.

“You’re Jungwu Han, right? With KG Chemicals?”

“Yes.”

“I look forward to working with you.”

Gichul held Jungwu’s hand with both hands and shook them respectfully. Afterwards, he looked back at the others in his group and said,

“If the Han River Railway shuts down for any reason, the City of Seoul Mass transportation system will be paralyzed. Please make every effort to make sure no accident like the one today ever happens again.”

Gichul’s request was adding to the pressure. Boyoung who finished greeting the Head of Technology of Korail returned with her eyes sparkling with expectation as she looked at Jungwu.

Jungwu scratched his chin.

‘Ok, this is getting intimidating. Should I have refused?’

*

Seungju who was sitting inside of Laboratory 1 opened his eyes wide after he heard Gitae’s story.

“Han River Railway?”

“Yes, I’ve been told they were off to provide assistance with that

problem.”

Out of coincidence, there was a breaking news being broadcasted on the flat TV screen on the side.

“Hey raise the volume!”

<<News Channel JVN>>

“Today, right before the weekends, two objects fell from the Han River Railway. There were no injuries reported from the accidents. The first accident took place in the morning where there was a partial collapse of the subway while the second occurred in the afternoon when a piece of the Railway fell onto the highway, damaging two cars that veered to avoid the falling debris.”

After the Anchor’s introduction, an interview with the victim came on the screen.

– I was driving past the subway and was about to drive under the bridge when I saw something dark fall right in front of the car. I was greatly surprised and I quickly turned the wheel.

“We will now hear a more detailed story from a reporter on the scene. Reporter Seungho Song.”

[Hello, Seongho Song reporting. I am standing at the Han River Railway where Yujin Chemical’s Safety management team, which was given the responsibility of providing reinforcement work of

the bridge by the City of Seoul and Korail, has arrived on the scene. Yujin Chemical is currently overseeing full management of over twenty Bridges across the nation and...]

Once Yujin Chemical became implicated, the other researchers began to listen in on the news with greater interest, gathering before the screen to watch together.

“Bridge reinforcement was their primary market, right? Was it Total Care?”

“That’s right. Their Project Lead is famous. She was qualified to join Korea Research Institute of Chemical Technology, but she opted for Yujin Chemical instead.”

“You mean your schoolmate Hana Ju? You told me she was crazy.”

“But she was really pretty so she was quite popular in college.”

Seungju turned to the people who were loudly having a conversation.

“Try to be quiet. Our guys might be on the scene over there.”

“What? Why would our team be there?”

Then, a thin woman came on the screen.

“It’s Hana.”

[...We have begun an interview with the officials. We now bring you live feed from the scene.]

– I would like to first extend a word of apology to the victims of the motor accident today. Yujin Chemical is planning on compensating for the damage independent of any compensation provided by the City and Korail. And to ensure nothing like this happens in the future, we will be quickly conducting a more thorough investigation.

[The viewers are highly concerned about unreliable safety inspection. Is there anything in place to address this issue?]

– Luckily, we were able to enlist the help of an expert and believe that we will be able to quickly get a resolution.

[Who is this expert?]

– Why don’t you speak to the man in question? Jungwu Han ssi

– Yes? Ah me? Ah, ah, should I speak into the mic? Hello, I am Jungwu Han with KG Chemicals.

“W...wait... Isn’t that our intern? That guy from the end of the week meeting.”

“Hey, I can see Boyoung behind him.”

“What are they doing there?!”

– The inspection process is quite simple. The cause is the corrosion happening at specific points along the gutter. They can easily be identified with the eye.

[But this is a problem Yujin Chemical could not detect after a thorough inspection spanning over two months. Are you saying that you, Jungwu ssi, is able to locate the problem that Yujin Chemical could not detect?]

– Well, I’m not that confident.

[Similar accidents will happen again. Is this what you’re telling us?]

– I’m not confident that I will fail.

For a moment, every researcher in Laboratory 1 froze.

Chapter 17 – Old Steel (7)

The safety inspection team wearing protective headgear with the yellow text ‘Safety First’ printed in the front stepped onto the Gyeongbu Line of the Han River Railway.

The man at the front picked up his Radio.

‘Tsst’

“Sir, we have entered the railway.”

-We have scheduled the trains to run at 10-minute intervals on Line A for the next 1 hour, so walk for 7 minutes and wait for 3 minutes.

“Roger.”

The Korail Safety Inspection Supervisor then shouted so that everyone could hear.

“We can’t go back until we reach Noryangjin Station, so please remain on alert! Everyone, please keep up with me and listen to my instructions! We’re heading out.”

Jungwu held onto the handrails and climbed on top of the exterior of the bridge.

Four lines of the Railway extended across to the other side of the

Han River.

‘Is it because it looks so worn out? It feels like I am walking on an old weathered path.’

Although Jungwu had been on this line many times riding the subway, walking on it gave it a brand new perspective for a familiar sight. Far away, even the flow of the river seemed somehow different from usual.

“Achoo~!”

A loud sneeze from behind Jungwu jerked him out of his contemplative state and woke him back to reality. He now faced a more realistic problem.

“This place has a great view, but, it’s too cold.”

Boyoung whose nose was red from the cold nodded to Jungwu’s remark.

“You’re right. It wasn’t that chilly this morning. It’s much worse in the evening. Brrr”

“You didn’t need to come along.”

“How can I not go when you are, Paracutter ssi? I’m still a Sunbae.”

“Even if you might catch a cold?”

“Even if.”

It's not my responsibility, Jungwu thought as he shook his head when he discovered Project Lead Hana don a thick padded coat.

‘She's only looking out for herself.’

It was an outfit that contrasted heavily with Boyoung's thin Researcher outfit.

“Sunbae nim.”

Boyoung, who was climbing onto the rails, looked up when Jungwu addressed her.

“At least have this on.”

Jungwu took off his own scarf and offered it to Boyoung.

“And what about Parachuter ssi?”

“I'm cold. But it looks like your nose is about to fall off from the cold.”

Upon being handed the still-warm scarf, she stared at the back of Jungwu who was casually looking out towards the river.

“Now that I look at it, Parachuter ssi is a little different from Professor Chun.”

“Different?”

“You’re Ju~st a bit more considerate~”

Jungwu turned to look at Boyoung who was wrapping herself with his scarf with a bright smile.

“Don’t get snot on it; it’s new.”

“W...What? I won’t!”

Everyone followed behind the Inspection Team Supervisor and made their way across the bridge.

About 7 minutes later, a subway train went by.

The team had climbed down the ladders to access the safe zone below the rails to wait for the subway trains to pass. Jungwu glanced at the bolts of the superstructure while waiting and saw that his vision zoomed in as if it was magnified.

‘Whew, that’s easy to see.’

Jungwu was relieved that he wouldn’t have to worry about the Mayor anymore.

“Project Lead Ju.”

He addressed Hana who had a high-resolution camera.

“Please take a picture of that.”

“Where?”

“There... Ah, I’ll do it. I only have to press the buttons, right?”

Jungwu took the DSLR which had a lens the size of an artillery shell and began to look for bolts he suspected were corroded.

5 PM. Noryangjin Station Employee breakroom.

The doors flew open, and a woman with a nose as red as Rudolph entered. The moment the trembling woman saw a warm electric heater, she ran up to it and brought her face closer.

“Ahh, warmth. So good.”

“Did you just get back?”

Jaegil who was on standby asked Boyoung to which she nodded.

“And the others?”

“They ran into reporters in the hallway and are answering questions.”

Jaegil turned to look in the direction of the rowdy hallway and asked another question.

“What were the result of the inspection?”

“Three areas look dangerous, he said. There’s a chance it might fall within 10 days or something. Aww, I thought I might lose an ear.”

“So there was a total of five bad bolts? If it’s true, then the repair process might be simple.”

Jaegil muttered to himself sounding relieved.

Boyoung rubbed her numb cheeks and ears before she turned around to speak.

“If we add the Quasicrystal coating next year, we shouldn’t have to worry for another three years. We have designed the particles to be small enough to fit between the bolt and the structure.”

“How confident.”

“I devel...not really, but I had a To~n of contribution in that project.”

Boyoung grinned widely and made a V sign, finishing her boasting which she was unable to do at the seminar.

“We look forward to the newly developed product of KG Chemicals. Although, it won’t be able to affect Yujin Chemical’s paint’s rankings in the industry.”

“We’ll just have to wait and see!”

Things were more or less resolved, so Jaegil thought that he should settle the conflict which began at the seminar.

“I was rude at the Seminar, Boyoung ssi.”

“You’re not calling me pretty lady anymore?”

Boyoung asked Jaegil while looking disappointed.

“Didn’t you express distaste being called that earlier?”

“That was because you had just given me a bad face. Being pretty

is a totally different thing. A praise ought to be humbly accepted.”

Jaegil couldn't help but grin with her exceptionally lively manner of speech.

She who became a researcher at such a young age was so full of passion for Chemistry that it seemed to be overflowing. Enough that her energy could be felt just by watching her from the side.

Jaegil did not dislike that part of her at all. In fact, because he had mostly been working with Project Lead Ju who tended to be cold and grounded in reality to a fault, he even envied having her around.

“I won't lose the next debate.”

“I'll take you on anytime. But does the 'next' include Jungwussi?”

“That's...”

“If that's the case, I am a little worried. I have never met any individual with such an exceptional intuition for Chemistry.”

“Ha, I've seen someone.”

Jaegil gave Boyoung a questioning look, but Boyoung replied with an impossible to decipher grin.

‘Ring’

Once the cellphone began to ring, Boyoung pardoned herself from Jaegil and moved closer to the windows.

“Hello?”

-Ssong. Where are you?

It was Donggil, the Sunbae at Central Research Laboratory.

“I’m at the office in the station.”

-Our team and Lab 1 are in the middle of a joint company outing. When you get out, head over here. Seongju Sunbae is here as well.

“Right after?”

-Bring Jungwu Han as well. We have questions for him.

In front of the Subway Station’s offices.

Five reporters surrounded Jungwu and pointed their mics at him.

“So there are only three areas that are in immediate need of repairs?”

“Yes.”

“Is this for sure?”

“I am certain.”

The reporters all looked skeptical, so Hana who stood beside him decided to open her mouth.

“The discovered risk areas will undergo a separate and thorough secondary inspection throughout the night. We have completed preparations to begin as soon as the last train passes later tonight. We believe that the immediate danger can be adequately addressed with our company’s Total Care system, and through periodic follow-up inspections...”

Hana used every opportunity to appeal the Total Care system and seemed to be experienced in advertising her company’s products.

‘So a crisis is an opportunity in disguise? What a scary woman.’

The interview dragged on for a long time. Because there were no cameras like at the Yongsan Station, Jungwu conversed with the reporters in a much more relaxed manner.

“Jungwu Han ssi. As an expert on rust, are there any stories you could share with us to raise awareness of the issue among the public?”

“Sorry, I am not an expert in that regard.”

The Journalists all had their notebooks at the ready and waiting. They looked like a hyena searching for anything that could become news.

‘It seems like they’re all disappointed to hear that there is not going to be another accident.’

If it was disappointment, then Jungwu felt disappointed as well. He didn’t realize back at the Yongsan Station due to the chaos there that no major media company was present.

Even if he wanted to boast to his friends later, saying ‘Hey I appeared on an online newspaper on page 13 for a few blurb’ would be embarrassing. All the more so because he had steeled himself and went as far as giving an interview.

Jungwu saw Boyoung peek her head out from inside of the Station Office. She gestured that there was no time left.

“Reporters, I believe it’s time for me to go.”

“Jungwu ssi! Please make one more comment!”

Jungwu didn't really have anything else to say and was planning on refusing the request when he turned and saw Hana who had used every opportunity to boast about her company's product, and changed his mind.

'Since I am getting paid to do this and all, should I really try and pretend to be an expert on rust?'

Jungwu thought about the chemical knowledge and details relating to this incident. He was able to come up with several comparisons right away.

"Um...About old steel. Most have the drawback that they're vulnerable to corrosion. The metal used in Han River Railway is very strong, but in reality, it's something with a limited life span, something with a time limit. It ages quickly, turns weak, and unreliable. Even if we use make up called paint, we can't hide the wrinkles."

Hana and the Reporters began to listen carefully to Jungwu's explanation that anthropomorphized the Railway and describe it as he would a person.

"The bolt that had fallen off today was one that had become fragile due to the activity of free electrons. Hurricanes, cold, heat; the force of nature is difficult to withstand with a naked body, right?"

Hana frowned when she noticed all the reporters stop what they

were doing to jot down everything Jungwu was saying and carefully record him.

Boyoung moved closer and pointed at her watch again. Jungwu nodded and continued to speak.

“To reiterate the thing about corrosion, although time cannot be rewound, the clock can be stopped if we have something like the Quasicrystal Coating developed by KG Chemicals. I’ll go for real this time. Project Lead Ju, thank you for your hard work.”

Jungwu bid everyone farewell and followed Boyoung and disappeared to the far side of the hallway.

The reporters whispered among themselves.

“What Jungwu Han just said, isn’t it perfect for the headlines?”

“I thought that Chemists were different from a Doctor or a Judge, but they seem really professional.”

“He said he was a researcher with KG Chemicals, right? He looked really young, but he speaks quite well.”

Boyoung covered her mouth and asked Jungwu

“Did you just advertise the Quasicrystal coating project back there?”

“Project Lead Ju was doing the same thing. Did I do well?”

“Very.”

“What’s this? A praise? Eh? Wait a minute...”

Jungwu pointed at the scarf Boyoung wore around her neck.

“You got it, dirty didn’t you! As I thought. Tsk Tsk. Please wash it...never mind, I just remembered that you’re bad at doing the laundry.”

“T...that’s not it!”

Before they began to climb down the stairway into the subway, a man walked up before Jungwu and Boyoung.

“Are you leaving now?”

It was Jaegil. Jungwu gave a deep bow before pointing towards Hana.

“I told her everything about what I’ve found. Oh yeah, about the percentage of the budget...”

“Once the inspection finishes, I will use the regular channels to

take care of it.”

He probably didn't need to respond in any way, but Jungwu nodded regardless. And when he was about to offer 'should I give you my bank routing information?' he had to swallow back a moan when Jaegil said the following.

“Our Management Support Division or KG Chemical's finance division have already closed doors for today, and since tomorrow is the weekend, I will have the money sent by Monday. That's fine, right?”

“Ah...that's fine.”

‘To the company? So that 15% isn't actually mine.’

Strictly speaking, the money Jaegil was offering, such as consultation fee or the percentage of the team's budget, was money that Jungwu shouldn't be able to accept personally. The act of demanding personal payment on company time was unethical and not something most companies tolerated.

‘All that extra work for nothing.’

Jungwu said to Jaegil unhappily

“I'll get going now, sir.”

“Jungwu ssi.”

“Yes?”

“Once the internship with KG Chemicals ends, please consider Yujin Chemical as well. I highly recommend it.”

“That’s...”

Boyoung’s eyes grew wide when she heard the sudden scouting offer. After saying farewell to Jaegil and leaving the station, she hastily asked Jungwu

“Are you really going to leave after the internship is over?”

He couldn’t go, and he didn’t want to go. Jungwu was about to answer no, but he felt like joking around.

“Isn’t it great that you’re going to lose a rival?”

“Y...Yeah I guess... but...”

Boyoung touched the Scarf that was still around her neck and seemed to come to a decision.

“I still have to give credit where it’s due. Parachuter ssi is ju~st a bit better than me at the moment. It’s frustrating’ but I have to

learn what I can.”

“Did anyone ever offer to teach?”

“Che”

Boyoung walked away briskly with her cheeks puffed up.

‘That Sunbae is so cute when she’s pouting.’

Boyoung called for a taxi before turning around to face Jungwu.

“Oh yeah, there is a company outing so follow me.”

“Outing?”

Chapter 18 – Old Steel (8)

A Taxi stopped in the market district close to the [Yeouido](#).

Island in the middle of Seoul, extremely populated. The Do in Yeouido means island. It is surrounded on all sides by the Han River. It is Seoul's main finance and investment banking district.

Once paying the fare and out on the street, Boyoung looked around and then pointed at a Chicken Pub with the name “Apocalypse of the Pigs”.

“It's in there, the outing.”

Jungwu, who climbed out after her, asked,

“Are you sure it's fine for me to come along here?”

“Of course. Donggil Sunbae has mentioned Parachuter ssi by name.”

“Ah ha. Hearing that Project Lead himself asked me to be here gives me more faith.”

Boyoung stopped.

“What faith?”

“There is a ‘Sunbae’ of mine at the research station that somehow causes unexpected problems for me every time he or she tells me to come with him or her.”

“Oh?”

“Hmm? Is it possible that you are that ‘Sunbae’?”

Boyoung avoided his accusational gaze and opened the door to the Pub and stepped within.

When Jungwu followed behind her, he was suddenly hit by the sweet aroma of fried meat and felt his appetite grow.

“There they are.”

There was a large table on the far side where twenty or so researchers were gathered around.

‘All of them look old.’

It couldn’t be helped since this was the meeting between the members of Central Research station’s main projects and the aces of Lab 1. Since there was no Sunbae that he knew well, he bowed until his waist was bent 90 degrees to greet them.

“Hello everyone! I am Intern Jungwu Han!”

His energetic greeting turned everyone's gaze towards him.

“He's the guy on the news earlier, right?”

“Right, it's that intern.”

Project Lead of Team 1 Donggil Lee raised his hands among the murmuring crowd.

“Boyoung! Take Jungwu and get over here!”

“Let's go, Parachuter ssi.”

Jungwu who was brought to sit next to Donggil didn't know what to expect and looked around nervously. Seated directly next to him was the Head of Lab 1, Seungju.

‘Why did they call me? None of the temp Researchers are here.’

He felt this about Donggil before as well, but seeing his brazen smile gave the feeling that Jungwu was looking at a man who has been following the elite course to success and was among those who belonged to the upper echelons of society. He had even heard that Donggil had obtained a PhD at a famous college in the US.

Donggil asked Jungwu after Jungwu was seated.

“[Soju](#) or beer?”

Soju is a type of Korean Vodka, with high alcohol content (classified as a spirit) and is dirt cheap. It's the preferred drink in Korea.

“Ah, I haven't eaten yet...”

“Then let's start with beer for now. We don't force anyone to drink unreasonably so make sure you control how much you drink on your own. And Boyoung? Mixed shots?”

“Let me get some food in me first. I'll start on the beer.”

Jungwu was shocked to hear Boyoung's answer due to her having an appearance that didn't quite fit someone who consumed alcoholic beverages.

Jungwu watched the beer be poured into his mug while spacing out when Donggil asked,

“Boyoung, did the cooperative project with Yujin Chemical go well?”

“Yes.”

“I know the Head of Research Jaegil personally. He wouldn't have accepted anything less than perfect.”

Because the question was asked while looking at Jungwu, Jungwu answered without much thought.

“The task was nothing difficult so.”

Donggil let out a ‘Huh’ unconsciously. After taking a shot of Soju, he turned to face Seungju.

“What do you think, Seungju Sunbae? You were really surprised earlier.”

A late thirties man scanned Jungwu without much concern with his bright eyes before giving a nonchalant reply.

“He said everything went well.”

“Wow, so chill. If the Intern made terrible mistakes, wouldn’t you have been on the chopping block for resignation as the person responsible for sending him?”

Jungwu panicked upon hearing the mention of resignation. Seungju put down his shot glass and turned to look at Donggil.

“Why are you saying things to scare the intern? Boyoung was sent to care for him. You know that research isn’t done solo.”

On hearing this, Boyoung turned to look out the window as she drank her beer. She was supposed to be the one to babysit him, but

all she ended up doing was follow him around.

“Jungwu ssi, don’t misunderstand me and listen.”

Donggil, whose face was filled with a gentle smile, suddenly became serious.

“What you’ve done today was very dangerous. Saying random things at the Press Conference is one thing, but putting KG Chemicals’s name on the line needs to have indisputable proof that the goal can be met. But I saw none of that in Jungwu ssi.”

“What you’re telling me is don’t do anything I can’t take responsibility for, right?”

“It’s good that you can understand quickly. From now on, just be more mindful in these matters.”

Jungwu nodded.

No matter what the reasons were, after working with Jaegil today, Jungwu became certain of something. As long as he could see the microscopic world, he would be able to brute force everything confidently.

‘The things I can see with ease, they cannot.’

This was an enormous advantage for a Chemist.

By the time it was 8 pm, the mood at the outing became more relaxed. The Senior Researchers surrounded Jungwu before he had noticed.

“It was so funny when you spoke at the end of the week meeting, Jungwu ssi.”

“Jung the Project Lead has quite a temper, but he’s mellow before Professor Shin.”

Jungwu laughed along with the Seniors and drank beer with them. He got carried away by the mood and ended up drinking four bottles.

‘I guess having a night out is the start of forming a network at work.’

He could begin to understand why his college mates boasted so much on becoming employed this summer.

The good thing was that unlike the temp researchers, the Seniors of the Central Laboratory did not seem to discriminate against him. The successful completion of collaborative work with Yujin Chemical must have increased their confidence in him.

“Hey Boyoung, there’s things here other than alcohol too. Hey, someone stop her. She had to be carried home last time too, remember?”

Jungwu turned to see what Boyoung was doing when one of the seniors next to him called out a warning. She was sitting towards the center of the tables where she and the other ladies of the Laboratory were chatting away and having a good time. She must have drunk quite a bit judging from the redness of her cheeks.

“Yes, Boyoung here! I’ll sing one song.”

“No one said that.”

“One, two~ Please clap along!”

“Let’s just drink quietly, you brat! You’re embarrassing us.”

Jungwu winced in his mind. He had been thinking that it was normal for seniors to urge the most junior member to sing and the said member to back out abashed, but here the seniors were begging the juniors to settle down and remain calm.

“Jungwu ssi, how are the preparations for the Assessment going?”

When the senior next to him asked, even the silent and reserved Seungju turned to see Jungwu with close attention.

“I’m thinking of doing something simple. Probably with Synthetic Resin...”

The list of research projects he had created earlier flashed through his mind. Because he had included every significant Fundamental Elements research topic, he could answer flawlessly without hesitation.

“Among the Polyurethane manufactured by KG Chemicals, there are lots of interesting products. Bed mattress, glue, saddle of Bicycles, Ski shoes, to components for an artificial heart valve.”

“Ah, Heart valve. Wasn’t that the project Seungju Sunbae was working on?”

Seungju Oh nodded briefly. Jungwu thought that Seungju’s behavior was quite unexpected. He was the type of drunk that goes silent. Because the highest ranking Senior present was so withdrawn and quiet, there was a sense of freedom among the gathering. There was little to worry about your superiors here.

A Sunbae next to Jungwu patted his shoulder.

“Well, good luck anyway. I went through it during the initial years, but not every bright idea becomes a project. The higher ups prefer more utilitarian projects, so don’t be too upset if yours doesn’t get selected.”

“Does that mean it’s rare for an idea to get translated into an actual project?”

“It’s almost nonexistent. What could newly hired temp researchers possibly propose that could compete with the professors? Ah, but there was that one from Pharmaceuticals who began her own project as soon as she joined. Her name was Cheuhn Moon or something. I’ve heard that not even Project Supervisors are able to say anything to her.”

Jungwu made a knowing smile, but the senior researcher sitting next to him was unable to see it. Now that he was reminded of her, he sent Doctor Moon a text asking if he had to come to work tomorrow.

‘Zzt’

[There are rules in place to restrict working on weekends unless there is a special type of research taking place.]

‘Ohh!’

Jungwu checked with the Senior researcher next to him and learned that wandering around the Lab without a project on weekends is looked down upon. Something about ‘right time to work and right time to rest’ bringing better results.

‘It’s a better end to a day than I had originally thought it could be.’

He had initially been reluctant to join the seminar. Except for being unable to get material gains, Jungwu felt quite satisfied with his day.

Jungwu smiled as he sipped on his beer. And when he looked to the left, he couldn't help but flinch. He hadn't noticed it earlier, but Boyoung had made her way next to him and was staring right at him.

“Oh my god, you surprised me. Weren't you singing?”

“Junghwi Sunbae told me she's going to kill me if I utter another word, so I came to seek refuge.”

When he turned to check the center of the tables, he saw the Senior Researcher Junghwi Shim gesture to him to 'stop Boyoung from talking'. Jungwu picked up an oven-baked chicken wing.

“You're hungry, right Sunbae?”

“N...mmph”

Boyoung's eyes grew wide when she was fed a wing as soon as she tried to open her mouth. Jungwu who successfully completed the mission sent an 'ok' sign to Junghwi.

Boyoung, who was munching away at the wings in her mouth,

pushed her way past the Senior who sat between them and placed an empty mug on the table.

“Pour me a glass.”

“Didn’t you have enough today?”

“The drinks taste so sweet today. And I’m quite resistant to alcohol.”

She then gave him a glowing smile. Jungwu had suspected her of ill intentions this morning, but now it seemed like it was just an integral part of her personality.

“When I drink, I drink intensely until the end. In case I get all teary if I don’t drink enough.”

Because she wasn’t slurring her words despite the volume that she had consumed, Jungwu picked up the bottle. After he began pouring her drinks, she stopped him once the mug filled up halfway by saying,

“Ey!” and picked it up.

“You have to leave room for Soju.”

“You’re going to have more mixed drinks? Wow, you really are strong to alcohol.”

“Please mix the right amounts.”

“Ok, ok.”

Jungwu then paused and soon after he began pouring the Soju in a shot glass. He saw the contents of the glass expand and zoom in until he saw their chemical makeup.

‘Soju has simple constituents.’

Most of it was just water and alcohol. Because it wasn’t something that he was interested in seeing, he tried to turn off his ability. But then his attention was focused on the movement of a chain-like chemical compound.

Aspartame.

An artificial sweetener.

It floated around the Soju as it trembled as if trying to communicate.

Jungwu initially thought that the Aspartame was shaking because of the shaking of the glass itself, but none of the other molecules seemed to be affected.

‘Why is it fidgeting so much?’

Did it hear him?

The myriad of Aspartame particles began to vibrate at once. It was as if it was enticing him to take a shot.

‘I can’t get drunk here. I’ll behave like a dog when I get drunk. I’m too much like my father.’

The moment he touched the glass with the tip of his finger to pretend to convey his intentions to the glass of Soju, the Aspartame seemed to flip, as if switching places with a mirror view image of itself.

‘Wha...what?’

“Hey, why aren’t you pouring me a glass?”

Boyoung took away the shot of Soju and poured it over the Beer. She swirled it few times before lifting the glass up high.

“Cheers!”

After knocking glasses against Jungwu’s, she took a gulp of her mixed drink.

And then

‘Pfff!’ she spewed the drink all over the floor.

“Aww, what’s wrong with this thing? Why is it so sour?”

Jungwu tilted his head while looking down at the Aspartame particles.

‘Did the molecules really change on their own? Or by me? Am I drunk?’

Aspartame’s two Amino Acids are Chiral molecules that are mirror images of each other. The left-hand form is sweet, and the right-hand form is sour.

Because the drink she just had contained much of the right-handed form, it was clear that it would be sour to the taste.

Jungwu thought about this as he tapped on Boyoung’s glass another time out of curiosity. The altered Aspartame molecules seemed to vibrate once more before it returned to its original form.

‘I...it happened!’

The Senior sitting next to them was disgusted by Boyoung spewing alcohol all over the place.

“Boyoung, are you drunk? Take a taxi and go home already.

Aren't you ashamed of how you are conducting yourself before your Hoobae?"

"No Sunbae, my drink tastes strange."

"Why are you blaming your drink for your mistakes?"

"But it's true."

"Bring it here."

Boyoung tilted her glass and poured a bit of the drink in her mug into his. The Senior researcher sitting next to them laughed and said,

"It tastes great."

"What? It really was weird..."

Boyoung took another sip.

"Eh? It's not sour?"

"You've lost it. Go home."

Jungwu made a fake cough after witnessing the scene. He had all the proof before him that the molecules really changed their form.

‘Then one more time.’

He poured the Soju into an empty cup to experiment.

‘Tap’

He took a taste of the drink after tapping the cup.

“Cough”

Jungwu gripped his neck upon tasting a liquid that seemed impossible to swallow. It jerked him awake. If Soju had such toxic flavor, then the Alcohol industry in Korea would go bankrupt.

“What’s wrong Parachuter ssi?”

“Nothing. And I’m so sorry, Sunbae nim.”

Boyoung stared at Jungwu without understanding the reason for his apology.

*

“See you all on Monday!”

The outing lasted until exactly 10 PM.

While bidding each other farewell at the entrance of the pub, Boyoung walked up to the street to catch a cab.

“Hey, Ssong. I called for a designated driver for hire. Should I let you off on the way?”

Donggil walked over and asked Boyoung, who shook her head.

“Sunbae, I know Grandpa asked you to take care of me. But I don’t like it, so please stop.”

“Wow, My Ssong knew one thing but missed two.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s true that President did ask me that, but what I’m doing right now isn’t just taking care of you, I’m expressing interest in you as a man to a woman. Can’t you tell?”

Boyoung’s eyes grew wide.

“What? No way we have a 10-year gap between our ages.”

“Is that bad?”

“You should date people around your age. And I make more money than you, so why would I date an older Oppa?”

“Ugh... right in the...”

“And I have no intentions to be in a relationship for now. I’ll pretend you didn’t say anything.”

Donggil had asked out of curiosity and had to swallow back bitterness when he was given such a clear-cut rejection.

“I think your judgement is affected by drinking. We’ll talk later.”

“I am not that drunk. And because of that strange flavor halfway through, I’m awake.”

“It’s fine. My ride is here. I’m going.”

Boyoung tilted her head as she watched Donggil hastily walk away. She then discovered Jungwu standing among the Central Research Seniors.

“Jungwu ssi, the interview was really funny. You should have seen Oh Sunbae go rigid when he saw you come on. He didn’t say anything, but he looked really worried.”

“I am very sorry. I was trying to act confidently.”

“No no, I liked your gusto. Central Research Laboratory needs such confident Researchers. Everyone tends to shut themselves away in their labs and aren’t all that active.”

Boyoung moved her hands to the scarf she was still wearing. She just realized that she didn’t return it yet.

“Go home safe, and see you all at the assessments.”

“Thank you for your guidance, Sunbae nim!”

“You sure got friendly with the Sunbaes quick.” Boyoung quietly commented after she walked up to Jungwu who was bowed at a 90-degree angle.

Jungwu turned around to face Boyoung after hearing her voice.

“You didn’t leave yet? I thought you were sent home after Junghwi Sunbae chased you out earlier.”

“She was kidding.”

“The look in her eye sure didn’t look like she was kidding.”

“I did beg for mercy outside.”

Jungwu who let out a laugh also had slightly rosy cheeks from

drinking. Boyoung looked up at him who towered over her as she carefully asked,

“Um... about that weird Sunbae you mentioned earlier.”

“Ah, yes?”

“If that ‘Sunbae’ asks you to come with her somewhere, would you go with her?”

Jungwu grinned.

“I’ll have to decide at that time.”

“Oh yeah, here.”

Boyoung undid the scarf and handed it to him.

“It was really warm. I’ll buy coffee next time.”

“Coffee sounds nice, as long as there’s no ulterior motive.”

“Ah, should I buy a meal instead? That sounds better.”

“Coffee is enough.”

“Ayt.”

Boyoung had already halfway given up asking about Professor Chun.

Taxi had already arrived, but Jungwu asked,

“Oh yeah, Sunbae. Quasicrystal coating. Do you have any sample left?”

“Why?”

“I want to apply a bit on my gate. It’s an aging iron gate, so it’s heavily corroded.”

“There’s none left at the Central Research Laboratory. There might be some available at Cheonju Plant... never mind. There might be some at home I took with me for research. Should I get you that?”

Jungwu nodded. Meanwhile, the Taxi honked its horn while parked on the sidewalk.

“If you text me your address, I’ll have it delivered there. Give me your phone number too.”

Once she had the number, Boyoung said “bye” and waved as she boarded the taxi.

“Where to?”

“Hoegi Station.”

Boyoung entered the phone number into her phone and initially wrote ‘Parachuter ssi’, but deleted it and entered ‘Jungwu Han’ instead and saved it.

‘And we happen to be the same age, right? Twenty-six. There’s no generation ga...’

Boyoung shook her head wondering what she was thinking, as she resumed staring at the back of Jungwu who grew further in the distance.

Code: AF-12

Case: Molecular Communication Network

Research: If the body’s senses are stimulated in a certain way (Ex. Alcohol), a particle that affects other molecules are generated at the fingertip. It’s thought to be colorless and odorless.

Chapter 19 – Snowflake Serenade (1)

Saturday Morning.

Jungwu had his eyes closed, but he was simply in the middle of rolling about the Living room lazily.

‘It’s great that I have weekends now, but...’

It was a leisurely morning for once. But being completely alert from early in the morning due to disruptive sleep schedule made him slightly peeved.

He was always drowsy and sleepy in the morning when he was unemployed and had nothing better to do, but now that he was employed for once... There was only one answer he could think of for why he had a worse rest than usual.

“Work Addiction. Doing whatever it takes to advance my career, ruthlessly seeking my own advancement... I must have entered a new chapter in my life.”

Jungwu made some exaggerated claims about himself that would have been embarrassing to utter in public, and ended up laughing.

‘Click’

“What did you say? You weirdo.”

He looked up in reaction towards the voice coming from the direction of the kitchen. Jisook was starting up the fire in the kitchen while yawning.

“Ah, mom. Good morning.”

“Why are you sprawled out in the living room? Have you drunk yourself to stupor and fell asleep there?”

“I didn’t drink that much. I couldn’t sleep in the morning so I watched some TV. Mom, I’m hungry. I’m craving some warm soup.”

“I don’t care.”

Although she said that, she took out some bean sprouts which she had trimmed ahead of time. She must be preparing to quickly make some [Hangover Soup](#).

“My mom is the best!” shouted Jungwu and then he continued to enjoy lazing about the floor of the living room as he swept it with his back. At that moment, he heard the mobile go off on the floor next to him.

“Who is it this early in the morning?”

He grasped the phone, praying it wasn’t Boyoung or Doctor

Moon. Luckily, the sender of the short text was a childhood friend he was close with since Elementary school.

[Sleeping?]

[Nope]

The moment the text was sent, the phone began to ring. The name “Soochan Park” came up on the screen.

“Hey, Soochan, what? You wanted to drink tonight?”

– The hell you mean drink? I’m busy as hell because it’s weekend. Do you wanna work part-time? You told me to call you if anything comes up.

“Part-time?”

Jungwu couldn’t help but laugh. He had been desperate at the time, but now he finally got an upstanding place of employment. Although he wanted to brag to no end, he couldn’t do that.

Jungwu snuck a glance at the kitchen before walking over towards the bathrooms.

“I’m not in such a position anymore.”

– Hmm? You work now?

“I work, of course. I worked hard during the weekdays, doing overtime, so isn’t it only right that I take the weekends off and rest like a proper member of the society?”

– Do you even realize how recently you cried to me about your unsuccessful job hunt? So what job is it?

“Don’t be shocked by what I say.”

Since the fact that he works at KG Chemicals would be revealed sooner or later, Jungwu revealed everything except for the pills he had taken.

– Wow, what the hell, you work for KG Chemicals?

“I was lucky. I shall tell you in greater detail in the future.”

‘About a year later.’

Although Soochan was a close friend with whom Jungwu had shared the same Elementary, Middle and High School, he could not violate the Non-Disclosure Agreement.

– I guess it can’t be helped then. I was going to go help set up the stage at Yeondeungpo TS, but I guess I’ll have to go alone.

“You mean that job where you have to move materials and chairs, the intense physical labor one? Hey, I was always against hard labor to begin with.”

– Today is the finale of the event, so I made an exception. I guess because it's the weekend event, the list of participants is amazing. It even has that, what was the name, the group you like, 'Girlfriends'.

Jungwu's expression transformed in an instant.

“What did you say?”

– Girlfriends.

“I...I'll be able to see Yulhwi up close? If I go help set up the stage, can I get an autograph too?”

– It should be possible. You just need to be careful about the manager. Only the staff are allowed close to the rehearsal room so there should be plenty of chances.

It was a very tempting offer.

– If you're lucky, you might be able to take a picture with them. Do you remember the picture I took with 'Punky Line' and posted on group chat?

“That caused a commotion I remember. The girl doing the V sign next to you was so pretty. How envious.”

– You don’t even know Osora? You [North Korean Spy](#)

“I was too busy trying to be employed and didn’t have time to watch TV.”

– But you still somehow know about ‘Girlfriend’. Those guys are still new.

“Actually, I only know about Yulhwi. I went to the Celebrity forum and, is it called selfie? I saw one and instantly became a fan.”

Once his friend began a conversation about celebrities, Jungwu who was already fully alert felt his mind become even clearer.

Although he didn’t have much interest in Idols, the one and only Album he had ever purchased was Girlfriend’s 1st release. He fell in love at first sight.

Although he had leaked a tear when he got a random photocard that contained the image of a different member than Yulhwi... anyway whenever he saw images of her gently smiling, he felt like all his troubles had melted away.

‘If I’m lucky, I can even take a picture with her?’

He would be given an opportunity one couldn't buy with money, not to mention he didn't have much money on hand for the near future either.

“Where do I need to be?”

The struggle was long, but the decision was quick.

– Ha, I knew you'd want in. Come to the Yeondeungpo TS Shopping Mall by 8. And if you bounce during the middle, it will make my position really awkward. The guy managing the staffing is really strict.

“Hey, Yulhwi is going to be there, no worries. Just wait for me, I'll be there quick.”

7 Am

Jungwu boarded the City Bus while humming. Because it was early in the morning on a Saturday, there were plenty of empty seats.

While he was absentmindedly watching the scenery outside the window, he quickly became bored.

‘Oh yeah, I wonder if there are any articles about me yet.’

Jungwu took out his phone. Once he entered ‘Jungwu Han’ a bunch of individuals with the same name appeared in the results.

‘Hmm.. not there.’

He even added ‘KG Chemicals’, and after a long time of scrolling around, he finally discovered a snippet from a small no-name news site.

‘Found it!’

[Meanwhile, Jungwu Han from KG Chemicals left the words ‘Metals have a limited lifespan’ to raise awareness about corrosion.]

Another article

[One Corrosion Expert warned ‘time cannot be rewound, the clock can be stopped’ and urged preventative measures against rust.]

There was no name mentioned, but Jungwu was elated on seeing himself be attributed the title of ‘Corrosion Expert’.

‘I’ll add that to my collection.’

He took a printscreen of his phone and left a reply [Thank you for the article]. Being called ‘the expert’ and having an article written

about him, although his name was not revealed, felt good.

‘Now that I think about it, it’s been exactly one week.’

It was the day he had been looking forward to, being able to earn 1 million Won (Roughly 900 dollars) for taking some pills. He didn’t imagine even in his wildest dreams that he would act as a Chemist upon taking those pills. He thought about the Human Test Subject Specialist and wondered if he was doing well.

Once he was done checking articles and ran out of things to do, Jungwu entered a community site’s forum’s humor section and began reading through the entries.

Jungwu was giggling over Funny photos, pictures of grumpy cats, stories from the Army, Embarrassing Celebrity pranks and the like when he finally reached the 9th entry in the ‘Popular Today’ list.

‘Hmm?’

[A Magician lives on the 1st Line]

It was certainly an attention-grabbing title. When he clicked on it, a video began to autoplay.

Jungwu had to swallow back a groan pretty soon.

The video was a closeup of an old man reading a newspaper, and someone's hand hovering over him. The video showed the sight of the old man's hair moving and dancing to the motion of the hand, with a lively music playing in the background.

‘That’s my hand!’

It was just the hand, and the image quality was so poor that not even the old man could be easily identified, but Jungwu was certain.

The replies were filled with a ton of [[ㄹㄹㄹㄹㄹㄹ](#)]

– Is he performing a magic show?

– That’s interesting. Did he use a magnet? Is there a string we can’t see?

└ Can’t you tell? He must have put a pencil board or something in his palm with static

– Why is he bothering that old man?

└ It’s written in OP. It was because he yelled at a sick kid to shut up and resumed reading his newspaper.

– That old man got off like that. Hairstyle so crazy ㄹㄹㄹ

Jungwu checked to see when this was recorded and searched around. But the uploader was just a reposter.

‘It’s not like my face has been exposed.’

It didn’t seem like he would have to take this very seriously, considering that the views weren’t that high on the video. Jungwu closed the screen and shook his head.

‘I should leave it be. It’s not like I’m going to be sent this video with a threat.’

Jungwu redirected his attention out the window.

In the distance, he could see the red morning sun rising between the tall buildings. He felt warm and comfortable despite it being winter; he felt that today would be a good day.

‘Shhhz’

He heard the static as the bus driver scanned the radio.

– December 16th, Morning Radio! How is everyone doing this weekend morning? We will start the day with a song. The first song is a seasonal one that rises up the ranks about this time of the year. Performed by Isul Yoon and Friends, ‘Winter is coming’~

The song opened with the clear, optimistic sound of bells as the

bgm.

It was an extremely uplifting music. Not to mention that the main vocalist was so full of life that it even seemed like someone was singing it live next to him.

‘They said it was winter’s seasonal song?’

It was the first time he had ever heard this tune.

Now that he thought of it, he had almost no interaction with pop culture in the last two years.

The problem was his preparation for employment. He almost couldn’t recall the last time he’s even been to the cinema. But a preview of the 3rd installment of the action movie he watched was being played on the Bus monitor.

‘Yeah, let’s take it easier next year.’

– We should sometimes run without looking back, so we can count our steps on the snow-

Jungwu who was humming and snapping his fingers to the music looked up into the sky.

It wouldn’t snow today.

Although it would be great to be able to walk through thick snow on a weekend like this.

—

8 AM, TS Shopping mall before opening hours.

Jungwu waited at the Terrace shared by a Cinema, Department store, and Restaurants for his friend to appear.

‘I have heard that this was the Yeondeungpo District’s main landmark. It sure is huge.’

The giant evergreen tree erected in the plaza was not lit up yet, but it still carried a very wintry atmosphere.

“Jungwu!”

When he turned his head in response to the deep voice, Jungwu saw a highly muscular young man who jogged up to him while waving.

Back in senior year of highschool, he had picked a safe Business Administration college, whereas Soochan had picked [HanYaeJin](#) or whatever to major in Stage Preparation. The pay was low but it was a very fun job, Soochan had said the last time they met for a drink.

Jungwu scanned Soochan up and down before saying

“You must work out nowadays. Your body is all chiseled up.”

“This is what you call occupational muscle. What about you, why are your dark circles so large?”

“Ugh, is it that obvious?”

Jungwu rubbed his eyes as he replied.

“I worked 5 days so far but did overtime on 4. I got so tired I couldn’t even sleep.”

“That’s crazy. Are all large corporations like that? Do they treat Interns badly?”

“I entered as a Parachuter, so I have to work extra hard.”

“Wow. How did Jungwu Han become such an upright citizen?”

Jungwu shrugged at Soochan’s reaction.

“I recently had a thought, maybe I was originally smart.”

“Yeah right.”

“Don’t be surprised at my occasional acts of amazingness.”

Jungwu was already aware of what Soochan ate for breakfast, what shampoo he had used, and what was the chemical composition of his toothpaste. He just didn’t mention it thinking it would shock his friend.

Soochan handed a name badge which read ‘Temporary Staff’ to Jungwu and motioned to go inside.

“Our event company doesn’t use outside help very often, but I put in a good word for you with the director, saying that you already have work experience. Keep it a secret that you’ve helped out just once during college and that’s it.”

“Will I really be able to get Yulhwi’s signature?”

“Just trust me. If there really isn’t an opportunity, I’ll speak with the director. I am known to be sensible and have some sway in the company.”

“Wow~ if you can do that, then thanks.”

Jungwu trembled when he thought of being able to get his next year’s diary signed by Yulhwi.

“You don’t want anyone else’s autograph? TOT’s teenage group’s

last participants are really something.”

“Not really? I don’t really know any, and I refuse any male celebrities.”

“Agh, you stubborn donkey, do you even know who’s coming today?”

“Who?”

“You don’t know the ‘National sister’ [Isul](#) Yoon?”

Jungwu thought that the name sounded familiar and dwelled on it when he realized that it was the name of the main vocalist for the song he heard on the bus.

“Ah, I did hear one song. ‘Winter is Coming’ was it?”

Soochan sighed when he heard that.

“Do you have any idea how old that song is? I can’t believe Jungwu Han is a Pop Culture Eunuch. Don’t act friendly with me around here; you’re an embarrassment.”

“Hey, I have my reasons. Do you realize that your sportswear was treated with Diphenyl Ether and Thio Bisphenol to combat odor-causing bacteria?”

“Di? Psy? Gangnam star?”

“I give up. I also refuse to associate with a Chemistry Eunuch.”

“Did you lose your mind?”

The old friends bickered for the first time in a while as they headed towards the back doors of the shopping mall.

It's called [Haejanguk](#) (guk meaning soup, so Haejang soup) also known as hangover soup, and is believed to help with dealing with a hangover. It consists of cabbage, vegetables, meat in a thick soup. It sometimes includes congealed blood or blood sausages. The name/type of soup originated from as far back as 14th century or before, so it is a soup with an extremely long history in Korea.

It is common to say someone is a north korean spy if they are unaware of what people consider to be common knowledge

ㅋ is the korean alphabet for the K sound, and ㅋㅋㅋㅋ basically sounds like someone snickering (ku ku ku ku ku), so it's kr version of 'LoL' I suppose.

HanYaeJin – shortened name of Korea Broadcasting Art School 한국방송예술교육진흥원

Isul means morning dew and is a very very feminine and cute name.

Chapter 20 – Snowflake Serenade (2)

Behind the building, the work was already underway with sound and light equipment being unloaded from the truck.

“Soochan! Move this next to the stage!”

“Yes, Sir!”

Soochan began to run so Jungwu followed suit.

The equipment was inside dark metallic containers and it did not take even a minute to fill up a cart with them.

“Soochan, doesn’t it seem like the pace is a little fast?”

“How can you say that from the start? We have to finish at least the basic setup before 2 o’clock. The singers will arrive before then.”

Jungwu pushed the cart as Soochan held onto the containers to ensure that the containers won’t fall off the carts. Once past the busy back doors, Jungwu had a complete view of the interior.

This place, called Atrium, was a circular composite mall space designed with a glass ceiling; it was possible to get a refreshing glimpse of the sky from anywhere within the building.

Jungwu directed his gaze to the center of the wide open 450 pyung (16000 cubic feet, 1500 cubic meter) space. A stage was in the middle of being constructed there.

Seeing the size of the area roped off against shoppers, it looked like they were also going to set up enough chairs to seat 500 people.

“If I want to sit here, do I have to buy tickets?”

“It’s the benefit of being a VIP customer. Normal customers aren’t allowed here either.”

Since the stage was visible from anywhere in the shopping mall it wouldn’t be difficult to watch the show, but Jungwu asked just in case.

“Would I be able to watch from up close during the show?”

“As long as you’re wearing that.”

Soochan pointed at the badge Jungwu wore. Jungwu stroked and cuddled his badge as if it was some sort of treasure.

“You’re just a spy that doesn’t even know who Isul Yoon is, why are you so happy.”

“Is she really that great?”

“Just watch the live show later. You’ll realize why people are so crazy for her.”

“If she turns out to be fugly...”

“Or you can just search her up.”

“For visual and audio surprise factor, I’ll pass for now.”

Soochan who was walking ahead of Jungwu motioned for him to stop.

“Let’s put this down here. Oh yeah, I am in charge of the equipment today so we don’t need to move the truss.”

“Okay”

Jungwu saw another staff member move a heavy metal support structure, and couldn’t help but respect him. He tried moving one last summer; That thing was incredibly heavy.

“Hey, Soochan.” called out the Director as he looked up while setting up the soundboard.

“Is the guy next to you the friend that you mentioned?”

“Yes, Director.”

Soochan quickly whispered ‘that’s the Director’ to Jungwu. Jungwu bowed deeply and gave his greetings.

“I’m Jungwu Han.”

“Ah, I see. I’m the Chief Director, Mujin Kim. My first impression of you is that you look like a hard worker. Could you please go grab the cables from the equipment truck?”

“I’ll unload these things first and then go.”

Jungwu’s well-trained obedience that he had practiced while working with the sunbaes at the research station impressed Soochan and made his eyes grow wide.

Jungwu ran off to find the cable box and brought it back, setting it down next to the Director.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you.”

As if he had nothing else to add, Director Kim wordlessly resumed setting up the soundboard with the other audio staff.

Soochan who was moving boxes turned to try and get a glimpse of Jungwu who was on the stage. Soochan raised his eyebrows

when Jungwu walked towards him.

“You really reformed huh. Were you always so on point?”

“Anyone listening might think I did nothing but slack off. The only reason why no one noticed my earnest work ethic is because I was too busy with preparations for getting employment.”

“Wow, shit, wipe your tears. It seems like yesterday you and I snuck out of the [evening class](#) to go play at the [PC bang](#).”

Jungwu smiled as he lowered the rest of the metallic containers onto the stage.

—

It took over four hours to move the main equipment. Meanwhile, the metallic skeletal frame of the stage was more or less complete.

When Jungwu was watching the other staff members piece together the speakers, he saw Soochan carefully bring a box out.

“Is that the machine that shoots fireworks?”

“Yeah. You have to be careful. And wear gloves.”

Jungwu put on the symbol of hard labor, the industrial strength

gloves, and gazed at the box nervously.

Soochan undid the box's lock and took out the device and then suddenly shouted "Wah!" as he pushed the device onto Jungwu.

Jungwu flinched and took a step back when he saw something red pop out for a moment.

Soochan snickered.

"Ha, scared ya."

"You little..."

The device he had claimed would shoot fireworks was actually a simple air blower that would make red cloth flutter to imitate fire.

"Go put it up there. I have to grab the petal airgun."

Once the devices he had received from Soochan was placed on the stage, another staff brought electrical systems and began to set things up.

Jungwu observed as CO₂ blowers and the fog machine was installed, but because of how rudimentary it looked, he didn't feel all that excited for the upcoming concert.

“Hey, does this thing really make the mood?”

Soochan who was carrying a device with a row of round bins which looked like launching platforms, laughed when he heard Jungwu.

“When the beams and the lights flash and the music booms, it gets wild.”

“Meh, I can’t tell. Maybe it gets better when it’s dark.”

“This one should get you going right away though.”

Soochan put down the item before the stage.

“Flower of the event. Fireworks.”

“Fireworks?”

“The fireworks that go in here is set up by the Director himself, and he’s really something. In this industry, he’s an expert in pyrotechnics and can win bids purely with this.”

Jungwu directed his gaze towards Mujin Kim when he heard this. The Director was still conversing with the sound team in a tent.

“The only thing we have to check is to see if the spark flies when

we press the button. You go rest.”

After he said this, Soochan squatted before the firing pad and took out a palm-sized container.

“What’s that?”

“Explosive powder for test use. I’ve been told it’s the same material as matches.”

What came out of the container was a fingernail-sized bundle of paper. Soochan ripped one open for each of the openings of the launchpad and inserted them.

‘Hmm?’

Jungwu was watching the contents enter the launchpad when he felt his sight zoom in on them and prepared himself mentally for the sudden change in perspective.

What he saw first was a particle of soot, the atomic-star of carbon. And floating around it were the smelly atomic-stars of sulfur. And among them were special star formations which seem to give off a purple light.

‘So this is the pyrotechnics mini galaxy.’

Once Soochan finished putting in the powder and pressed a

button, a small spark flew from the launchpad.

Jungwu scanned the opening of the launchpad and discovered evidence of previous fireworks.

The atomic star formation which explodes with a bright flare was in a form similar to fountain fireworks. And in another opening, he found evidence of a compound that leaves streaks as it flies through the air.

“Ooh”

Jungwu let out a sound because it looked rather nice.

“Why are you getting impressed by this? You’ll be surprised when you see the show later.”

Jungwu couldn’t help but smile inwardly because he had not been impressed because of Soochan. He just found it endearing that Soochan was getting confident because Jungwu was reacting to everything so positively.

“Soochan, when can you start preparing your own stage?”

“I’m still far from it.”

“You’ve already done it for three years. When will it be the day I can watch a show in the VIP seat thanks to a friend?”

“There’s too much to learn. Especially with these guys. Performance firework techniques is not a skill that you can pay someone to learn. It’s not something someone like me can do just yet.”

When Soochan indicated the launchpads, Jungwu tilted his head.

“Is it that difficult? Can’t you just put in the powder?”

“Are you insane? Do you want to set the stage on fire?”

Jungwu inspected the launchpad when Soochan spoke as if the device may explode like a bomb.

“A fire is caused when there is an abundance of burnable material. And this only uses a small amount of complete combustion powders. It looks like the base of the firework is Strontium with Flash Powder mixed with Nitrous Cellulose. All of these were added so that the fireworks burn cleanly. It will burn for about 1 second before it burns out.

“S...tron what?”

Soochan blinked a few times. Jungwu considered for a moment before adding.

“If you know which powder does what, it’s not that difficult.”

“And how do you know that?”

“I met a great teacher and studied a bit. It’s one of the reasons why I was chosen as an intern. And aren’t complete combustion material the norm anyway? The ones that produce no soot as long as there is enough oxygen and the right temperature. You know, even the Gas oven uses...”

Jungwu noticed Soochan blink with a blank expression and decided to ask.

“Did you fall asleep during [Common sciences](#) class?”

“Every lecture! Even though you slept through all of them too...”

Soochan fanned his sweaty shirt as he made his way to the tent before reemerging with a box labeled ‘fireworks’.

“These are the ones I use for practice. Chinese fireworks.”

“Those look like ones you can buy at the mart. The ones with unimpressive flames.”

“I ordered them from a manufacturer. Its different from the cheap ones.”

Jungwu asked Soochan who took the cheap looking fireworks

and was in the process of attaching them to the launchpad.

“What are you doing? I thought you said you weren’t going to be in charge of setting up the stage?”

“This is for rehearsal use. If we don’t get the singers to get used to the fireworks during rehearsal, there are times when they flinch on stage.”

“So are you allowed to just use any firework you bring then?”

“It’s a type of setup where you can put in any kind of firework you bring. And I do actually have enough experience for this much!”

Since Soochan was also confident enough to go as far as to promise that Jungwu could get Yulhwi’s autograph, Jungwu said ‘sorry’ and gave in.

“Anyway, let’s go have lunch. Wait just 3 minutes.”

“Ok”

While Jungwu was quietly watching Soochan insert the fireworks, his eyes caught the sight of one that was empty and left open.

He was able to see the mini firework galaxy here as well.

‘I still get the feeling it’s of a cheap quality, but at least the ingredients are the same.’

Jungwu turned to look at Soochan.

“Hey, Soochan.”

“Hmm?”

“Can I set up one of the barrels myself?”

“Heh, you wanna try one?”

“I just want to see if I can do it.”

“Do what?”

“Oh, there’s something.”

Soochan made a look as if his patience was being tested, but he pointed at the barrel labeled number 3 out of 10.

“Well go ahead and try it then. This will go off on the 3rd guest, so when it’s time for Girlfriends rehearsal, the one you attached will go off. It’s great, right?”

“Oh, thank you.”

“So among those over there the most expensive...”

“Soochan!”

Suddenly a voice calling for Soochan could be heard from the tent.

“Yes, Director!”

“Where is the box with cables for connection type A to Mic?”

“Where the boxes are stacked...”

Soochan turned to Jungwu.

“I’ll be back. Wait here.”

“Mhm.”

“Jungwu searched around the fireworks box and took out just the empty containers. While he was looking through the various mini fireworks galaxies, he finally found ones with the same packaging.

Jungwu tore open the packaging without hesitation and checked the contents.

Seeing the actual components, he was able to see the pyrotechnics more clearly.

When charcoal and sulfur undergoes combustion, they heat the calcium nitrate, and the resulting oxygen from this reaction feeds the flames during the explosion.

Depending on the ratio of the components the reaction speed could change drastically. And the different types of metallic dust used could control the color of the light.

‘These are silver rocket style.’

He opened up another package.

‘These are turquoise debris.’

When he thought of mixing Aluminium and Calcium powder, he saw the formula mix and a new chemical reaction emerge.

He opened the lid to the largest firework.

‘This one has almost all the colors. Is it a multistage round? Great, let’s use it.’

Once Jungwu made an estimate for the reaction speed, he removed the fuse and the propellant from the multistage rocket

and installed it into the launchpad and began mixing powders that were wrapped in paper to prepare the rest of the fireworks.

‘Dust-stars, you stay where you are.’

Jungwu controlled the + and – ionic reactions in his palm and blew away the uselessly wild free electrons.

‘Ssst’

While chasing the image of the reaction he saw in his mind, he ended up opening and using almost all the fireworks from the box.

‘Click’

Just as he finished wrapping up and closing the lid, he saw Soochan approach from afar. Jungwu who had been strangely focused on his work turned his gaze to the fireworks box.

‘Did I use them all? When I was thinking of Yulhwi I just...’

Although he had made excuses like this in his mind, it was closer to the truth to say that it was like a child’s curiosity playing with fire for the first time.

‘But will it go well? It should right?’

Because the world of Chemistry he could see through his special vision had never let him down, Jungwu was able to be a little confident in his work.

“Did you install it?”

Soochan asked as he approached. Jungwu quickly closed the box and pushed it aside.

“Yeah, kind of...”

“Let’s go. Time to fill our stomachs before we resume working.”

Luckily he didn’t seem to notice. Jungwu followed Soochan but glanced back at the box that was filled with nothing but empty containers.

“Soochan. How much did you pay for everything in that box?”

“300,000 Won was it?” (250~300 dollars)

If it was around 50,000 Won, he could have just repaid him with his pay for today. Jungwu made a promise to himself ‘I’ll repay you next month’ and apologized in his mind.

Korean high schools (and some middle schools) have what is literally called late night classes. It is not uncommon to have school from 7 am until 9 pm in Korea. No school, or no night class? Then it was perfect time to be going to cram school (Classes you

pay to take extra, administered by an education company)

PC Bangs are LAN party rental computer shops, and some places (like rural places) are as cheap as 10 cents an hour, whereas famous or large-well established places in the city may go as much as 1 dollar an hour.

Instead of teaching each of the three major sciences separately (physics chemistry biology) all are taught in one class. It's a more generalized and simpler version of science.

Chapter 21 – Snowflake Serenade (3)

“So full...”

Jungwu lay across the top of a wooden box.

This was the storage area of the shopping mall, and compared to the chaos outside it was relatively quiet and peaceful.

“How did you find a place like this?”

“This is already my 3rd time setting up an event here.”

Soochan plopped down next to Jungwu and handed over a canned coffee.

“Jungwu, it’s so nice chatting with you while working again. It sure makes time fly.”

“My joints hurt. Who is Yulhwi anyway? And why am I doing this?”

“But you said her gentle smile washes away all your worries.”

“I’m not so sure about that now. What good is an idol when my body is in pain?”

“The singers are on their way to the prep room. Most of the heavy lifting is done so all we have to do is some light menial tasks and watch to your heart’s content.”

“Okay”

Jungwu rubbed the warmed up can of coffee against his cheeks as he asked,

“How much longer do we have left on lunch?”

“1 hour and 30 minutes.”

“Wow, we still have plenty of time after rushing to eat our food. Let me just nap for half an hour then.”

“Here?”

Jungwu yawned loudly.

“I told you, I had to stay late too many times. I get so sleepy at random hours. I just need to pass out for a little while.”

Soochan clicked his tongue when he saw Jungwu immediately close his eyes.

“If you sleep like that your face will freeze. Do you want me to get

you a hotpack?”

“Ooh, thank you. Soochan is such a great worker~”

Jungwu was starting to slur and appeared to be drifting off to sleep already. Soochan shook his head as he left the storage unit.

Not too long after, he returned with two hotpacks and put them inside of Jungwu’s jacket. Although Jungwu was moved around, he was like a corpse and did not wake up.

“Overtime? Wow, he must really be living like a normal member of the society.”

Soochan checked his time and then said,

“I’ll be talking to the Director. I’ll come wake you up when it’s time.”

There was no answer from Jungwu who had already fallen asleep.

—

‘Ouch, hot.’

Jungwu felt hotness coming from somewhere around his chest

and patted himself to find the source.

The two hotpacks were in the middle of giving off intense heat.

“Hey, Soochan, you almost burnt m...”

He was in an empty room all alone.

Jungwu sat up and took a look around. It was a dark and quiet storage space filled with products. He didn't think of this earlier, but he could have frozen to death sleeping in here.

He checked his cellphone for the time. It was 1:15 pm and luckily, his break time was not over yet.

His friend who had left him with a long cold can of coffee and two hotpacks was nowhere to be found.

‘But why was I so tired?’

The exhaustion he felt earlier was not something he could overcome with willpower. It was the second night in a row when he had fallen asleep as if passing out, making Jungwu worried if he was ill. He patted himself down to check.

‘I'm not in pain anywhere. I wasn't like this even a week ago.’

He could only suspect his symptoms to be a side effect of AF-12. But Doctor Moon had confidently declared that there was no such thing and went as far as to guarantee compensation for damages.

Jungwu resolved himself to give her a call after he is done with the part-time job here and picked up the canned coffee.

“Cold.”

He was just thinking that he prefers a warmed up can of coffee during winter when his eyes fell on the hotpack that was still giving off warmth.

Of course, he was able to immediately understand the chemical process of how the hotpack produced heat.

“A reaction between fine powder of iron and oxygen...”

It was not all that different from the process of forming rust. It was just that it happened at a faster rate than usual, creating heat in the process. The mixture of salt and activated carbon in the solution further accelerated the oxidation reaction.

Jungwu stared at his palm before turning to look at the hotpack.

‘It’s usually warm for about half a day, right?’

He wondered if it was possible to speed up the reaction even

further and heat up the canned coffee. Jungwu placed one of the two hotpacks on his palm as an experiment.

“Hya hya, gather, dust stars.”

Half-jokingly, he gathered as many free electrons in the storage unit as he could into the hotpack.

Because of the free electron's kinetic energy, slight current began to run through the iron powder.

‘Great, good job! Keep going!’

Perhaps his wish got conveyed? The free electron that was already swirling in the hotpack in his hand began to move even more rapidly.

“Ouch”

The heat became too much to bear with his hands, so Jungwu placed the hotpack on top of the wooden box.

“Wow, it works.”

With just a rough estimate, it seemed like it became 3 to 4 times hotter. Impressed that his hotpack reached temperatures fit for a heater, Jungwu placed his can of coffee on top of the hotpack. With this kind of temperature, it would be enough to heat the can

and a bit more.

“Stardusts, I didn’t realize that you guys would be so useful. Great work. But.”

They worked hard, but it wouldn’t be good if they built up static electricity, so Jungwu quickly chased them all away.

It would have taken just 3 minutes for the can of coffee to be sufficiently warmed on the supercharged and improved hotpack, but the door to the storage unit opened up on the other side.

Jungwu assumed that the person would be Soochan and turned to look, but he froze in place.

It wasn’t his friend, but a small and slim young lady with a guitar slung around her back.

She put her ears against the inside of the door and listened to the sounds coming from the outside. Once she verified that there was no one else around, she quickly climbed and sat on top of the product boxes to the side.

‘Who is it?’

Jungwu decided that he needed to make his presence known to the lady who seemed to be oblivious to the fact that he was there, so he stood up.

But

As if he was possessed, Jungwu stopped when he heard the song she began to hum out of the blue.

The sweet sound of her humming was producing an appealing melody.

It wasn't like he listened to much music recently, but even he could tell that just listening to this song was noticeably uplifting his mood. It was an experience he never felt before.

‘Diling~’

Once she had her guitar out and added the guitar accompaniment to the melody, her once quiet hum evolved into rich and powerful chords, filling the air of the storage room with her graceful tone.

‘This must be what people mean when they say ‘it brought tears to my eyes’.

The music of the unfamiliar lady brought stimulation to his ears that were as surprising to experience as the first time he was able to see the atomic structure with his eyes.

Once her humming was complete, she began another melody using only the ‘ah’ sound. She changed octaves here and there and

sang in various intensities as if she was warming up her voice.

‘She’s a singer, right? Well, it’d be strange if she wasn’t with that kind of skill.’

Between the metallic shelving, he could see white sneakers bouncing up and down to the rhythm.

Jungwu who finally woke up from the sudden ambush of music and charisma immediately moved toward the shelves. Despite his footsteps, the guitarist was too focused on the music to notice him.

The profile view of a graceful lady strumming away at the guitar with her pale fingertips entered his sights. She was wearing a baseball cap, so the bill was concealing her face. Her face was so small that only a small portion of her chin was visible underneath.

“Excuse me...”

Once Jungwu opened his mouth, the guitar stopped immediately.

Jungwu sensed that she was startled so he quickly added,

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I was taking a nap during lunch time on those boxes over there. Are you one of the participants in tonight’s mini concert?”

Once she saw the staff badge around his neck, she seemed to

breathe a sigh of relief.

“I must have disturbed your sleep.”

The sound of her voice had the same timbre as the voice singing the song. It was a neat and sharp voice. Jungwu felt that the mere suggestion that such a sound could be considered a disturbance ought to be considered a sin and waved his hand in denial.

“No, I was already awake. And I don’t know what song this is, but I really enjoyed it.”

“...You don’t know what song this is?”

“I haven’t been able to listen to much music lately. Anyway, I’ll disappear right away. Please continue with your practice.”

Jungwu had been speaking when he suddenly saw the position on the guitar touching her hand zoom-in as if his perception was sucked in. He had to stifle a groan.

‘At this timing?’

He saw the strings made of Copper and Zinc twist and taut in a chain structure. They had a coating on it to keep away rust and foreign matters. Most of the coating on the strings were chemically successful in providing the intended protection.

But among them, Jungwu noticed the lowermost string. As if there was a humid spot on the string, he saw free electrons glued onto the center of it causing a corrosive reaction.

‘It might snap anytime soon, I guess.’

Jungwu felt that he should inform her, so he opened his mouth, but the canned coffee he had on top of the hotpack fell over on the side.

“Oops”

Jungwu ran over to the wooden box and caught the can that was rolling away. It was nice and toasty. He pulled the sleeve over his palm and also picked up the hotpack.

“I was lying down here for about half an hour, and it’s cold here. Here, take this.”

Jungwu placed the hotpack next to her and backed up.

“I don’t need it anymore. Make sure not to touch it directly; you might burn yourself. It’s not a normal hotpack, that one. For about 2 hours the Activated carbon will vibrate and cause accelerated oxidation reaction and... well I guess that’s unnecessary information. Well then.”

Jungwu bowed and was on his way out when her hat moved up slightly.

“Excuse me.”

“Yes?”

“I would like it if you could keep it a secret that I am in here.”

“Ah...Sure thing.”

Jungwu didn't even know who she was, so he nodded and opened the door.

“Oh right. The bottom string on the guitar, it looks like it got rusty. Please inspect it. Unlike the other strings, it only has one layer applied.”

‘Click’

Once he was in the hallway, he saw Soochan walking towards him.

“Did you rest well?”

Jungwu put his hands over his lips and pointed towards the exit.

“What's up? Why are you being so cautious?”

“There is someone practicing inside. Don’t bother her.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. But I think it’s an extremely talented solo singer.”

Soochan lurched when he heard.

“The only solo artist today is Isul Yoon.”

“Really?”

Jungwu turned to look at the product storage room.

“Eey, no way. Why would such a famous singer be doing that in there?”

“Did you see her face?”

“I couldn’t see because it was dark, not to mention it wasn’t like it was the right moment to have a conversation either. Oh yeah, I did see that the guitar had the letter IS writt...”

“That’s Isul’s guitar!”

Soochan explained as he opened the exit door.

An idiot who couldn't recognize a major star in person, not even thinking to ask for an autograph when he was so close, Jungwu couldn't help but smile at his friend's many complaints.

"I only need Yulhwi's autograph."

When Soochan saw Jungwu pop open the canned coffee and take a sip, he said,

"Why didn't you give that to Isul instead? I bought that can you know."

"Do you have any idea how I heated this up? Why would I give it to a random woman I met for the first time. Its super warm now. Wanna taste?"

"I'm going to lose my mind. Staff who can't recognize a celebrity. I bet Isul was beyond shocked."

—

'Dururum~'

Isul who was going to practice the song for today began to look around when she noticed something warming her up.

'Is it that thing?'

The hotpack left behind by the staff member. Amazingly, the hotpack was warming up the entire space like a heater. Now that she looked at it, she thought back to what he had said earlier.

Just in case, she plucked the 1st string. Isul shook her head after listening to the clear sound of the string. 1st and 2nd string were the most common strings to break, but it hadn't been long since she changed the string; how could it rust already?

‘Ah well.’

She grinned when she recalled being taken aback to hear that the man had never heard her hit song before. It was possible. No matter how famous or popular a song was, it couldn't possibly be loved by everyone.

‘Duru-ting’

She messed up a note.

‘Did I really get that upset?’

She shook her head to deny it when her cellphone gave notification of an incoming text.

[Hey Isula, where did you disappear to?]

It was a text from her manager Sungjae Ji.

She had no choice but to escape from her designated prep room due to the fact that it was right next to TOT's. The seven member all girls group that debuted last year is currently at the highest rank for their ability to mindlessly chat away.

When she thought of them sticking to her from morning until evening saying 'sunbae sunbae~' she had no choice but to escape to this place before the rehearsal began.

[I'm in the product storage unit. Please come quietly without alerting the TOT.]

She sent a text and resumed practicing her song. She was scheduled to play a minimum of four songs. She would need to sing additional songs if the audience demanded an encore, so she needed to focus much more than other events.

'Knock knock.'

The music stopped with the polite knocking on the doors.

"Isul, are you here?"

The door opened, and a late thirties and rather sly looking man peeked inside.

“There you are.”

Manager Ji entered and closed the doors behind him before walking up to Isul.

“Hey Isula, couldn’t you just send TOT girls away if they bother you?”

Isul smiled, knowing that TOT had not a shred of malintent, and shook her head.

“Sunbae shouldn’t do such things.”

She had been the same at her debut. She completely and utterly understood the desire to stick next to her esteemed seniors and endlessly talk about music.

“Isul you are too considerate for your own good.”

“If that’s so, then you could just take care of me, you know?”

“Are you hinting that I’m somehow not?”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

Manager Ji took a glance around the dark storage unit and shook his head.

“How could I tolerate having Isul practice in such a place. If your fans find out, they’ll lynch me to death. In such a cold...”

He was about to continue when he noticed that it was warm around Isul. He made a puzzled look.

“Its nice in here. Does this shopping mall have heaters in their storage units?”

Isul paused from drinking water she took out from her guitar case and pointed at the hotpack.

“It’s probably because of that hotpack.”

The manager made a quizzical look as he reached out to grab it when he flinched and withdrew his hands in a hurry.

“What the hell! Why is it so hot?”

“Is it that bad?”

“It’s crazy how hot it is.”

“I did hear that it was a special hotpack.”

“Who said that? A fan?”

The manager poked it out of curiosity and yelped in pain.

“Ah, he warned me not to touch it.”

“It’s an amazing product. We should use this thing instead of a mini heater. Please ask that fan, where he got it from.”

Isul recalled the man she had just seen.

“Don’t know the name.”

“He’ll come when you perform.”

“No, I mean mine.”

The manager looked at her without understanding.

Isul took a moment to recall the man she had seen. Although he said some peculiar things, his eyes were clear, and his actions were earnest.

Man. Curiosity.

Words she had forgotten about.

‘What am I thinking, about an event staff.

But the subtle imbalance she felt in her heart, she didn’t dislike it. For a singer/songwriter, emotional stimulus was absolutely necessary; she remembered her Sunbae Sangun Yi say to her.

“Manager, prepare a spare string for the guitar please.”

*

2 PM, TS Mall Mini Concert Rehearsal stage.

Chief Director Mujin Kim spoke into the loudspeakers.

“We will now begin. Please have the first participant enter the stage. Sound, light, and special effect team, in your positions.”

A dozen or so staffs raised their thumbs to indicate they were ready.

“Director Kim!”

The Public Relations staff ran up to Mujin who was going over the list of participants and preparing the setlist for the first group.

“We received a call that Girlfriends will arrive late. They were on their way from Gimpo international airport, but there seem to

have been an accident somewhere in between, and the cars are backed up for miles.”

“Their estimated time of arrival?”

“About 40 minutes late.”

“Then please go request Isul Yoon ssi to go first.”

Mujin calmly gave the order and swapped the setlist for 3 and 4.

Chapter 22 – Snowflake Serenade (4)

30 minutes later, it was in the middle of an 8 person all male early teen group ‘Calgunmu’s’ rehearsal.

Jungwu and Soochan stood right at the base of the stage. Soochan who was wearing a staff-only radio set couldn’t stop grinning.

“Why are you so happy?”

“This is the first time I get to wear this equipment. The Director decided to do me a favor since I have my friend here.”

Jungwu didn’t really understand what was so appealing about a radio where nobody really spoke, but Soochan was elated.

“Hey, what about me? When does Yulhwi get here? I waited since lunch, but I didn’t get a single glimpse of her.”

“But you already got an autograph from the early teen group. Lead Junho is really popular.”

When jets of CO₂ was released on the beat with a particularly flashy move, Jungwu flinched.

“You think I wanted to get that autograph? I just happened to run into them, and they stared at me as if they really wanted me to

ask for one. You told me that Staff members have to be considerate.”

“The celebrities really enjoy when fans go wild for them. Please make sure to go wild when Yulhwi gets here. She’ll happily go as far as take a photo with you.”

Soochan cheered loudly for the young boy group who danced perfectly in rhythm to their complex choreography.

Amidst the booming sound of the speakers blasting the music and ringing the eardrums, the second song was done.

‘Peww, pop!’

A weak firework was launched from the launchpad and decorated their finale.

“Next is Girlfriend’s turn. Your chance is when they finish and climb down the stage.”

“Okay.”

Jungwu was filled with anticipation with the thought that he would be able to finally see Yulhwi in person and watched the back of the stage with interest. But the participant showing up after the boy group was not the celebrity he had been expecting.

One lady walked up with a guitar in hand.

Jungwu tilted his head. Soochan was also shocked when he saw the stage.

“It isn’t Isul Yoon’s turn yet though.”

Isul in the bright open space was completely different from one he had seen from the dark.

She appeared to be in her early twenties. And despite the fact that she wore ordinary clothes and a cap, the pure white skin which were visible here and there seemed to make her glow even without the help of a spotlight.

“She really does [seem like a doll](#).”

Soochan put his arm around Jungwu who was expressing his astonishment.

“Heh, do you understand now what great fortune it is to be able to see Isul from the front of the stage?”

“Do you think Yulhwi is going to look that pretty in person as well?”

“Mmm, I wouldn’t say that actually. People that work in this industry keep a tight lid on it but from what I managed to hear...”

“Most of the female Idols completely rely on makeup for their appeal. Few of them wear makeup that could be classified as total transformative disguises. But Isul is different. Look at her unmakeuped face. She seems to be simply aglow.”

“But she does have makeup.”

“What are you talking about? There’s obviously no makeup on her.”

Jungwu was about to list out every ingredient in Isul’s cheeks, but he stopped himself. He didn’t feel like breaking his close friend’s fantasy. And truth be told, the surface of Isul’s skin was so soft it probably didn’t even really need the makeup.

And no matter what, she was a singer with a voice that had enraptured him from the first time he had heard it, so he awaited the performance with anticipation.

She plugged the Guitar into the jack and then did a simple voice test before nodding to the music staff.

She sat before the mic and strummed away at the body of the guitar rhythmically, and the speakers let out a refreshing prelude.

And the humming began.

“Eh? This song...”

“Yeah, you’ve heard it before right? You must have heard it at least once even if you didn’t know the artist. Any Korean should have heard it at least once.”

“It’s the song she sang in the storage unit.”

“Oh my god. This is your first time hearing ‘Once again’ too?”

Jungwu was enthralled by the melody which made him forget about his day to day difficulties and exhaustion.

The spotlight blinked along to the music, and the floor was covered by fog. It was an uplifting song, but because the vocal was gentle, no drastic stage special effects were employed.

“I’m going to have to buy an album later. It’s a song written for a salaryman like me.”

“Just how long do you think you’ve been a salaryman for you to say that?”

“I now completely empathize with that life. You sure have it hard, Soochana.”

Jungwu enjoyed the music while bobbing his head along to the music, and 3 songs were done before he realized.

For Isul's turn, the shoppers moving outside the boundary of the partitioned area stopped to listen to her song.

Once the three songs were done, even the people standing on 2nd and 3rd floor terrace applauded. Isul, who was startled at the sudden noise, bowed deeply which led to an even louder applause.

Isul was slightly shocked, so she spoke into the mic.

“Thank you. But there are people shopping so please let's be considerate of them.”

“Encore! Encore!”

Listening to people shouting at the top of the lungs now, Isul narrowed her eyes as if she heard something funny.

“There is still another song in the setlist, so calling for encore already is...”

A wide grin spread across everyone's faces after hearing her joke which overflowed with innocence. Effortlessly suppressing the loud applause, she soon began her last song.

Soochan snapped his finger as soon as the song began.

“This is a hit song that came out this fall, ‘It's so awkward’.”

“What?”

“It’s a fun title, right?”

Isul sang a song that was neither nice nor naughty. Instead, the lyrics walked a thin line between the two, a rather quirky song with peculiar lyrics. And unlike the previous songs, the melody was made quite fun.

I wanna be alone, but it’s boring alone. Call a friend? But he’s too chatty. Just what is it I want~

Ordinary emotions, rich sound, and the ability to make the audience bounce along to the music; Jungwu experienced first hand the reason why Isul was nicknamed ‘the national sister’.

Once two verses were over, the song came too soon to a conclusion. And the Director instructed the stage crew to fire the special effect fireworks to go with the flow of things.

[Isul ssi, the fireworks will be going off at this timing. Please do not be alarmed.]

Text popped on the screen installed on the side next to the speakers meant for the performers.

-Number 3, GO!

When he heard that, Soochan said ‘Eh?’ and turned to look at the control room. Jungwu also turned to look in the same direction.

“What is it?”

“They pressed the one you installed...”

‘Tsss’

The lid to the launchpad opened as soon as the sound of the fuse could be heard.

‘Babababababa-bang!’

Thumb-sized rockets flew into the air and fanned out.

What appeared was so unexpected that Isul who had been mentally prepared reflectively reeled back. Soochan who was watching from the front row was far more surprised, reaching a point of disbelief.

‘Is it going as planned?’

Jungwu felt his heart race with anticipation.

The various color of rockets rose to about Isul’s eye level and

began to undergo various reactions based on their ingredients. The embedded 2nd stage rockets were ones that glittered as it burnt in the air, forming letters.

[GIRLFRIEND]

The letters appeared for a fraction of a second before fading away leaving nothing but smoke.

It was squiggly, and some letters were flipped, but that brief moment of appearance was so spectacular that the audience who were planning on another round of applause at the end of the song just stared with their mouths agape.

Seeing the quickly fading smoke left behind, Soochan read aloud the letters with a trembling voice.

“G...Girlfriend?”

“Yeah, but the D was too deformed and looked more like an O.”

Soochan snapped his head towards Jungwu and retorted.

“Hey, you crazy m...”

“Wait a second. Huh, why isn’t it coming out?”

“What?”

“There is one last round remaining.”

The late firing round popped up as soon as Jungwu finished speaking.

‘Po~’

Even the sound was cutesy, forming a heart shape before disappearing. The shoppers who had been watching transfixed until now began to snicker.

“W...what the hell was that...”

Soochan became speechless. When he saw Jungwu walk over to the Launchpad and squat before it, Soochan asked.

“What have you done?”

Jungwu scratched his chin and answered nonchalantly.

“I tried to make the heart pink, but there was no combination that would have produced it.”

“That’s not what I’m asking!”

“I’ll pay you back for the fireworks next month.”

“Pay what back?”

“I used all of them trying to make that. Sorry.”

‘Beep’

– Hey Soochan!

Soochan’s radio that didn’t seem like it would ever speak suddenly made noise.

-Get into the control room this instant!

The first call he had ever received over the radio. It was the forced summon by the Director Mujin Kim. Soochan’s expression transformed as he shouted while sprinting off towards the control room.

“Jungwu, you f... We’ll speak in a sec.”

Jungwu shook his head after checking the residue left on the launchpad.

‘It wasn’t because it was made in China. I was not skillful because this was my first time.’

It seemed like learning to mix and time the reaction would need some practice like checking reaction speed of each powder and some experimentation.

‘It would have been perfect if it had gone off during Girlfriend’s rehearsal. But the order just HAD to be changed at the last minute.’

Just when he was regretting what had happened.

Jungwu’s eyes met with Isul’s, who was still sitting as if frozen in place.

‘Whoa...’

If anyone were to ask ‘just how pretty can a person be’, Jungwu would want to answer it this way. That there exists someone who is so gorgeous that it’s breathtaking.

“Um, Hotpack...right?”

Isul recognized Jungwu. Because Soochan had been complaining all this time to Jungwu about acting like a fan, he quickly answered,

“You’re right. I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you earlier. I am your fa...”

He knew too little about her to call himself a fan.

“...I am your fan starting today. Your singing was the best.”

Jungwu lifted both of his thumbs, and then his gaze fell on her guitar.

“It snapped.”

“Excuse me?”

“The string.”

Isul then came to a realization and looked down at her guitar.

“Ah.”

“Hello, Sunbae!”

“Isul Sunbae!”

The members of the Girlfriend group who finally showed up for rehearsal surrounded Isul, jumping up one by one onto the stage.

“Oh, hello gang.”

Isul picked up her guitar and rose from her chair.

“Jungwu! He said you need to come too!”

“Me?”

Jungwu had to miss this opportunity to watch Yulhwi from up close and run to the control room.

Isul’s Spokesperson walked up to her.

“Isul, great live. You were in the best condition today.”

“I found out the name of the staff member who gave me the hotpack.”

“Really? Then I’ll go meet them later.”

“And the Guitar... It would have ruined the show tonight if it had broken later, right?”

“Really? Wow, you really dodged a bullet there. Maybe it’s a sign that next year will even be better than this one.”

The Spokesperson continued to speak in order to make sure Isul wouldn’t fret.

“The brand is Martin String, right? I told Manager Oo to go grab some.”

“That’s the right one.”

Isul nodded, as her eyes remained fixed on Jungwu who was moving away from the stage.

—

Jungwu entered the tent next to the line of sound equipment and was startled when he saw Mujin’s sharp gaze. Soochan stood next to the Director looking like he had a great deal of things he wanted to say.

“Hey, Soochan’s friend. I heard that you had set up those fireworks earlier?”

“Yes.”

Mujin continued to stare with a piercing gaze.

“Were you a participant in World Fireworks festival before? The stuff they do on Han River during summer.”

“No sir.”

“Have you graduated from a Stage Prep technical college?”

“Only Soochan has.”

When Jungwu continued to shake his head at these questions, Mujin looked more and more curious.

“I have done stage prep for ten years and never seen anything go off like that. Where did you learn to do that?”

“Well, it’s not really learning. A firework is an object used to observe light and fire caused by chain explosion of explosives and metallic compounds, right? I just measured the combustion reaction speed of the powders and modified the resulting...”

Jungwu noticed that Mujin and Soochan did not appear to be following his explanation at all, so he simplified his explanation right away.

“It was a firework made with a chemically calculated formula. I am a chemist.”

For a moment, Mujin had to think if Korea Broadcasting Art School had a chemistry department.

“Soochan, I thought you said he was someone from stage prep industry?”

“I...I’m sorry!”

Soochan bowed very deeply. Mujin waved his hands as he said,

“No, no, I’m not mad at all. I’m just amazed is all. Fireworks in an event is a double-edged sword. Its flashiness shouldn’t draw the gaze of the audience off of the singer, but it can’t be done poorly either.”

Mujin checked GIRLFRIEND who began their rehearsal as he continued to say,

“Those fireworks earlier, it would have been amazing if it was fired with them standing there. Soochan’s frien... I mean, you said your name was Jungwu?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to set up all the fireworks for tonight’s show? And the thing you did with the letters earlier. If you could teach the Chemical formula or the recipe to our company, I’ll give you double of today’s pay...no, triple. That’s about the same pay we give to the lighting staff.”

Soochan’s face brightened up at his words. He gestured and indicated for Jungwu to quickly accept the deal.

“Uh... It’s difficult for me to say this directly, but I’m the kind of person that wants to be compensated a fair value of work done.”

“Go ahead and say. I think there’s plenty of room for negotiation.”

“Thank you for offering bonus pay on par with a production staff. But Chemical formula is not something that’s easy to copy. I’ll teach Soochan slowly over time, so please ask Soochan to do it later.”

Mujin turned to look at Soochan.

“Well, I was planning on having him set up the fireworks after he gets more experience anyway. Sure.”

“And one more thing. Please pay Soochan three times the rate for today as well.”

“What?”

“In return, I will add fireworks that will display your company’s logo. It’s ‘Ssing Company’ right?”

Director Mujin couldn’t help but grin when Jungwu made such an adventurous offer after acting very submissive earlier.

“Soochan, now that I see him, your friend is really a fox.”

Soochan replied with “I guess he is,” then turned to Jungwu and

silently mouthed the words “dude, why are you doing this?”

“Well screw it. If you can do that much, I should compensate you. Since he’s a chemist who’s going to dramatically raise the standard of our company’s unique selling point.”

Haggling successful. Jungwu realized that he had successfully managed to pay back his friend for accidentally using up all of his fireworks for fun, and smiled in relief. Soochan stared at Jungwu with an expression showing complete lack of comprehension of what was going on.

“And Jungwu, take this too.”

What Mujin handed Jungwu was a staff use radio.

“Then get to work. Soochana, you go to my truck and get fireworks for Jungwu.”

“Yes, sir!”

Jungwu and Soochan left the control room after receiving their orders.

Jungwu glanced at Soochan and made a disgusted expression.

“Stop looking at me like that. Gross.”

“Jungwu ya~”

“I said stop it.”

“My freng Jungwu han!”

“Dude! Stop it!”

Look/seem like a doll is a phrase invented when western Porcelain dolls were imported to Asia. It means the person had either an otherworldly (almost perfect) appearance or that they were incredibly cute. Korean, being an inherently ambiguous language in both word choice and grammar, probably means both are applicable.

Also having pure white skin is considered one of the most important beauty feature. Asians do not like tanned skin (makes them think you are a peasant).

Personal Anecdote: There was a white American woman who was engaged to a Korean man, and the man's entire family always praised her for her pure white skin. When the time for her marriage ceremony came, she did what a lot of American women do, which is to go to a salon and tan herself to look healthy and skinnier. The entire family lamented saying she ruined herself.

Chapter 23 – Snowflake Serenade (5)

Inside the storage room.

Jungwu was lost in thought while looking at the array of fireworks on the ground labeled ‘H Innovation’.

“Are you filming yet?”

He turned towards Soochan. Soochan was holding a rather expensive looking camera he somehow managed to borrow. Soochan waved back at him.

“Just a sec, the angle... got it.”

Soochan gave a bright smile once the camera was aimed at Jungwu’s face.

“Wow Jungwu is so~ handsome~”

“Ack stop it. Focus on filming mostly my hands.”

“It’s a 4k recording, so all of it shows up, don’t worry about it and start working.”

Jungwu, who was kneeling over the fireworks, asked,

“Where did you get that camera anyway?”

“I borrowed it from a professional cameraman I know. I had a lot of run-ins with him during events like these, and we got along pretty fast. Although, I did introduce him to a bunch of people whenever the opportunity arose.”

Soochan then focused on the image of Jungwu disassembling the fireworks and separating the parts and then muttered as if talking to himself.

“I still can’t believe you did the setup for these fireworks, Jungwu. It’s really amazing.”

“Well, I surprise myself these days as well. Have you walked on top of the Han River Railway before?”

Soochan took his eyes away from the camera to look at Jungwu directly.

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Never mind then.”

After boldly ripping the packaging for fountain fireworks, Jungwu calmly poured out the content onto a paper set on the floor.

“I said that I would teach you, but I won’t be explaining the theory behind it in detail.”

“Wait why?”

“Because you won’t understand even if I tell you. Just watch carefully, and memorize by repetition. Just memorize the location and the number of each and every grain of these gray firework powder.”

“...Do you really think that would be possible for me?”

Jungwu answered after arranging the powder into a “T” shape and rolling the paper up.

“I don’t know. This is going to be your source of income. If you won’t give it your all and tackle it with a ‘do or die’ attitude, what can I say?”

“You’re absolutely right. I’ll do my best to memorize it. But just in case, tell me the theory anyway. As long as it won’t interrupt your work.”

“It won’t.”

“I am planning on rewatching this couple dozen times. But simple terms only, please. I am a Liberal Arts Major.”

“So all you’ve got is enthusiasm...”

Jungwu pondered for a moment before continuing.

“Making letters appear in the air isn’t as simple as burning a letter shaped incendiary in the air. It uses a mixture of chemicals with varying burn times and trying to have them combust just once. Some chemicals finish their reaction in the launch pad, and some last just long enough to form letters due to being delayed by about 0.1 second.”

Jungwu ripped up another firework and picked up a clump of powdered copper.

“Try to imagine that this here contains an element and electron...no, think of it as having a star.”

“A star?”

“Use your imagination. Element star and a dust-like satellite orbiting around it. When energy is transferred in from the outside, these dust stars guys start to run amok. When that happens, one of these guys go ‘ugh so annoying’ and shoot a green light.”

“What the”

Soochan snickered.

“Focus. So when you burn these grains, you get a green light. And the rate the dust stars get annoyed, that timing determines when it gives off the bright light.”

“Wow, Jungwu were you always so well spoken? I didn’t understand all of it, but you were like a chemistry teacher just now.”

“Really?”

Jungwu let out a fake cough and continued to speak. And along with instructions, he continued to work on the fireworks.

Once 20 or so minutes passed, the launch pad for #1 was complete.

“So this is TOT’s.”

“It didn’t take too long.”

“It didn’t?”

This kind of speed was only possible because Jungwu was able to watch the mini galaxy as he made his progress, but he still asked just in case;

“I know it looked simple, but the only reason why it looks so easy is because I am avoiding the condition in which it begins the

combustion reaction.”

Jungwu checked the dust stars that he had pushed away to the corners of the room to prevent static discharge and continued.

“You can’t take this lightly. This is like...You’ve thrown a grenade in the army before, right? The Sergeant probably told you that if you screw up throwing it, then it’s over. You should treat this the same way. If something goes wrong, throw your body over a barricade immediately.”

“Should I be getting a dangerous material handling license or something?”

“Licence?”

“What happens if the fireworks go off by mistake?”

“Ah...I’ll at least visit you in the hospital.”

“Hey! Wait. I am going to memorize this completely and get recognition. For now, I am following around the Director and learning, but in 10 years, I will make a name for myself.”

He didn’t know whether his friend would actually come to realize his dream, but Jungwu wished the best for him.

“Don’t forget my help in this.”

“Of course.”

Jungwu made sure to remind others who to thank. Who knows what will happen in a few years.

After about an hour and a half later, all four sets of fireworks for the stage was complete.

“Good work Jungwu. Let’s relocate them and have our dinner.”

Soochan hoisted the camera onto his shoulder and lifted up one end of the launch pad. Jungwu picked up the other end and opened the doors to the storage room when he noticed a mob of people running through the halls.

“What are they doing?”

“Since they’re headed towards the standby room, I’d guess they are fans running to ask for autographs.”

As they moved towards the exit Soochan continued to explain.

“When they’re doing that, usually it’s after the managers have given their permission. It means that the makeup for the stage is complete and the stars are ready to receive the fan’s loving.”

“Hey, what about me? Yulhwi?”

Jungwu had forgotten about the autograph and photo and looked on as if he wanted to jump into the fray and join the mob.

“It would be difficult for now since there are a lot of people, so I’ll ask the Director later. He already recognized your skill so it should be simple.”

“Don’t flake out.”

After firmly reminding his friend, Jungwu and Soochan put down the launchpad before the stage.

Jungwu was watching Soochan connect the ignition system when he noticed an unfamiliar man approach them. He was thinking that the man might be heading in their direction, and then finally their eyes met.

“Jungwu ssi?”

“Yes?”

The neatly dressed man in suit bowed and introduced himself.

“I am the Head of Starpiece, Sungjae Ji.”

The man immediately stated his business.

“I wished to ask you regarding the hotpack you gifted to one of our singers, Isul Yoon.”

The fact that the manager of Isul had come searching for Jungwu personally made Soochan’s eyes go wide with surprise.

Jungwu asked in response.

“What about the hotpack? Did something go wrong?”

“No, I was just amazed at the effectiveness of it. So I was just curious about where did you obtain it.”

“Oh, that...”

When Jungwu was considering how to explain that it was a custom made product utilizing dust stars, Soochan who was listening snapped his fingers.

“You’re talking about the ones I bought two of earlier, right? I got it at the convenience store just across from here. Is it really that good?”

“It was a product they sold here? Thank you. Isul ssi was very grateful for it. I don’t know if you’ll need this but”

Head Manager Ji handed over an autographed CD of Isul to

Jungwu.

It was the official 2nd album scheduled to be released in the upcoming fall. The cover image had a picture of Isul's humble smile, but the image brought out the endearing quality befitting someone nicknamed 'the National Younger Sister'.

Jungwu accepted it out of reflex.

"Then please take care."

Once he expressed his gratitude, the Head Manager turned and quickly left, leaving Jungwu slightly panicking. It also didn't feel right to chase down someone who was leaving only to try and explain the situation to him.

"Wow, Jungwu Han."

Soochan gazed at Jungwu with an amazed look.

"You drank your coffee alone, and gave away your hotpack meanwhile? You didn't seem all that interested, but you sure are good at networking."

"Dude, why did you just say that to him?"

"What?"

“The thing I gave them isn’t something you can buy. I modified it to increase the rate of corrosion. Making even one took a while.”

“Corrosion what? I mean, since you were hesitating you know? Since I was the one to buy it, I just told him the truth as is.”

He couldn’t really blame his friend on this one. The only problem was that the dust stars were more effective than he had anticipated.

Soochan put his arms around Jungwu.

“It was just a hotpack, but she sent her manager over to thank you. And you know... how did you manage to make a connection with a major star in one shot? I feel like if you asked her to take a picture with you after the show, she’d immediately accept.”

“What’s the point?”

“Who knows? Isul might develop an interest in you after this.”

Jungwu shook his head after gazing into the pretty face on the cover of the album.

“Don’t give me false hope. How can she take an interest in one ordinary man when she has the adoration of a country.”

Soochan sighed loudly, saying ‘oh you’.

“Jungwu, you always seem like such a realist when it comes to women. You were the same when Eunshil moved away.”

“Eunshil? Do you even realize how long ago that was? That was back in elementary school.”

“I rather live with my dreams. The Director’s wife was originally a Model. They met during an event.”

Soochan indicated the direction of the production room.

“Let’s report and eat first.”

While walking, Soochan asked another question.

“Don’t you have a girl you’re interested in at work?”

“No.”

“Any pretty ones?”

The image of Boyoung and Doctor Moon appeared for a brief moment in Jungwu’s mind. Not only were they simply beautiful people, but they were also intelligent and charismatic.

“Your face says yes!”

“I don’t know. I am so busy at work I don’t really have the leisure to be thinking about that kind of stuff.”

“Leisure? What are you talking about? Being together during hard times and helping one another, that’s what it means to be in a relationship. Try proactively helping them pretty ladies at work, like you’ve helped me out. I bet they won’t be able to help but fall for you. It’s not like you have a hideous appearance. Although you’re not quite as...”

“Soochana.”

“Hmm?”

“I just had a thought. I don’t think this is a topic a lifelong single guy should be advising about.”

Being hit where it hurts, Soochan made a very tight fist.

“Yes, you bastard, I’ve only [learned about dating through literature!](#)”

The Director who was undergoing a final sound check with the audio team turned his head when he saw Jungwu and Soochan walk up to him.

“Oh Soochan, is it done?”

“Yes sir, the setup is complete.”

“Good work both of you. Go take a break until the show.”

When Soochan realized that Jungwu was mouthing the name ‘Yulhwi’ to him, he nodded to show that he understood.

“Director, sir.”

“Hmm?”

“You know the manager for Girlfriends, right? Could Jungwu get Yulhwi’s autograph later? And if possible, a photo as well.”

Director made a large grin as he turned to look at Jungwu.

“What, so you were Yulhwi’s fan?”

“Ah...yes...”

“That’s surprising, considering they’re still relatively new. Well, it’s definitely much better than Soochan who gets excited about every attractive star. I’ll make it happen.”

The Director nodded coolly after making a subtle but rather substantial diss against Soochan.

“I was planning on going to dine with the managers after the inspection anyway. We should just go together then.”

“Really?”

“You can just go follow Girlfriend’s manager after finishing your meal. I’ll have a word with him.”

Jungwu was surprised at how easily the Director agreed. Soochan gave a ‘I told you so look’ and smiled smugly with his eyes.

—

About 10 minutes passed since they began waiting to leave for dinner.

“Mr. Representative is heading in.”

Along with the voice, a middle-aged man entered the tent.

It was a tall man who wore an exquisite well fitted suit who didn’t give the impression of being as old as he was in spite of the graying hair and facial features placing the man’s age around the fifties.

The Director who was controlling the volume settings then had a sudden shift in his facial expression and ran up to greet him.

“Mr. Representative! What brings you to this place?”

It was a completely different tone of voice from the one used to address Jungwu and his friend earlier, so Jungwu gave a quizzical look to Soochan. Soochan answered in a whisper.

“He’s the sponsor of the event.”

“Wait, is he the Representative of the TS Mall?”

“Yeap. Chairman Daegil Yum. I’ve heard that he’s an influential man who runs major logistics company aside from the mall.”

Even his clothes seemed special. Perhaps due to finally seeing a fabulously wealthy man in person, Jungwu’s attention was naturally drawn to him.

“Director, I have something to ask. Do you have any device that can simulate snowfall?”

“Snow? Normally we use something called paper shower. We put a bunch of paper powder into a launch bin and shoot it up to give it the effect.”

“Ah. Exactly how does it look like?”

“Please wait a moment. Soochan! Go grab my tablet!”

Soochan ran out like a bullet the moment the Director issued an order.

“Excuse me sir, but why are you asking about the snow effect?”

“It’s because of an event happening at the TS Mall.”

The Representative pointed at the banner on one side of the plaza. Jungwu followed his gesture with his eyes and saw a familiar advertisement he could see during wintertime.

[If it snows in the month of December, Big sale! Lots of presents!]

“As you can see, that’s one of the events run by most of the malls during winter.”

When the Representative muttered ‘Vice President you idiot’, the Director turned away and pretended he didn’t hear anything. Most likely, the Vice President was the one to plan the event.

“I’m not sure if you’re aware, but [in the month of December, there has not been a single day of snow](#). We’ve had that banner up for half a month and weren’t able to actually run the event.”

“Is that so? But what’s the problem with that e...”

He looked as if he thought it was rather a good thing for the mall

that there was no need to give discounts thanks to the fine weather.

The Representative made a knowing smile as he explained.

“Winter sale also serves the purpose of cheaply reducing the inventory that piled up over the course of the year. Furthermore, if we can make customers happier during their visit to the mall, then it can increase the rate of their return visit. If it ends up snowing the entire month, it could potentially lead to some losses, but that’s also not a bad thing since it will lead to an increase in potential customers. But now...”

“Here it is!”

Soochan arrived out of breath and handed the tablet over to the Director. Director immediately searched for a video of a show and showed it to the Representative.

“Oh, so that’s what it looks like. Not bad.”

“It can only appear like snow thanks to the lighting. It is greatly different from how real snow actually is. Especially since the paper has a rough texture to touch whereas snow is cold and soft.”

As if to confirm his suspicions the Director asked,

“Were you hoping to fire paper snow to try and run the event?”

“That is the case.”

“The longest you can sustain a paper snow effect is about 30 seconds. Although it can be used for a surprise effect for the stage, it won’t be easy to try and replicate snow with it. And cleanup is a whole different matter entirely.”

“Is there anything we can do?”

After taking a glance through the Plaza, the escalator, and the stairway, the Director muttered,

“Using paper shower as a basis, we could try spraying sugar powder to try and emulate snowfall, and then use styrofoam granules to simulate accumulation? And then also apply snow spray periodically...”

“So that will work, right? That’s excellent. The event today is quite large. If we were to decorate the plaza as if it had snowed and prepared a surprise event, wouldn’t it raise interest in the show? Having customers find snow on a day it didn’t snow; it would be great for marketing purposes.”

“No sir, this would require a minimum of a day of preparation to pull it off. The event begins at 7 pm. It would be impossible to do it in just two hours.”

“...Is that so?”

Representative looked disappointed.

“As a stage performance professional, at least you tried to answer me. Vice President keeps giving me meek answers like ‘wouldn’t it snow at least a day this month’.”

The Director was forced to make a bitter smile.

“I’ll keep an eye out for the weather forecast this week, and if it doesn’t snow, I’ll have to go ahead and launch the event. I’ll cover the expenses. Please make it as realistic as possible. I’ll leave it to you to alleviate my worry about the mall so I can enjoy my time with the family on the weekend.”

“I will make the preparations.”

“Secretary, please enter this into the calendar.”

“Yes, Mr. Representative.”

The assistant standing at the back of the production office answered right away. As soon as he gave instructions, the Representative let out a large sigh.

“We planned a ‘When it Snows on Christmas’ event last year and it did not end up snowing. The year before that, we planned a White Christmas event and saw no snow either. This year we

planned for the entire month of December. If this one goes poorly as well, the customer forums will go wild. Of course, the Vice President will...”

Representative Yum motioned his finger across his neck.

While listening to the dilemma of a CEO that wasn't really a dilemma, Jungwu looked out of the gigantic glass wall. It was sunset, but there was not a puff of cloud. Just as he had observed this morning, there was no chance it would snow in this weather.

‘Snow, huh?’

Perhaps it was due to wishing to see it? He noticed that the sky through the window suddenly expanded in size as if it was being zoomed in.

‘What the...’

A single cold reaction passed before Jungwu like a hallucination.

It was a cold looking Ice Star. And around it, water molecules began to stick and freeze around it.

The Ice star grew larger and larger until it created six winglike structures and grew into a transparent crystal. And it fluttered through the air until it landed on his cheeks.

‘Ooh col...oh wait it’s not cold.’

After he reacted to the artificial snowflake and let out a chuckle, a chemical reaction formula suddenly passed through Jungwu’s mind.

‘Should...should I be telling them?’

Determining that there was nothing to lose from informing them, Jungwu made up his mind.

“Um, Director.”

Once Jungwu opened his mouth, both the Director and the Representative turned to look at him.

“Oh right, you guys were waiting, right? Since we’re not done with Mr. Representative here, go ahead first.”

“It’s just. I have something to add to this conversation.”

Soochan grabbed Jungwu’s arm with a worrying look, but Jungwu patted his friend’s hands to reassure him and faced the other two men.

The Director asked,

“So what is it?”

“What do you think, if we were to spread real snow around here?”

“Learn X through Literature” = All theory, no practical knowledge

Snow in December – Claiming there was no snow is hard for me to believe in. Korea has Siberian winter, making Korean winter one of the coldest in the same latitude. I vividly recall one meter of snow accumulation in Seoul every winter in my childhood. So this is an author created situation.

Chapter 24 – Snowflake Serenade (6)

“Real snow?”

Perhaps it was too unexpected. The Director repeated the words with a stunned look.

“Are you suggesting that we use something like a Snow Blower and spray artificial snow or something?”

“Something similar.”

“Would that work? It’s not like this is a skating arena, and there isn’t any temperature control equipment necessary to maintain freezing temperature. How would you maintain the snow in indoor temperature?”

Unlike the pessimistic reaction of the Director, the Representative showed interest in his gaze.

“Director, who is this fellow?”

“Ah, this man here is the staff in charge of today’s Pyrotechnics .”

“Wasn’t that your area of expertise, Director?”

“He’s also highly skilled. For me, all I can do is choose the timing

to fire off the effects, but Jungwu is able to manipulate the fireworks itself and give it flavor.”

The Representative looked Jungwu up and down as if to inspect him.

“Highly skilled you say?”

Jungwu didn’t get intimidated nor did he look overly confident, maintaining a calm look as he faced the Shopping Mall’s CEO. The Representative said,

“I have considered using real snow before. I’ve visited Dubai once and seen their ski resort. Why shouldn’t it be possible to do something that they managed to do in that sweltering desert?”

A question was posed by the Representative. Since Jungwu had never imagined anything so fancy as running a ski resort in the middle of a desert, he answered while scratching his chin.

“Of course it will be easier than in the desert. Like the Director said earlier, cold temperature is necessary to form snow. But having bone-chilling coldness like a Skating Rink is also not necessary.”

Jungwu thought about the snowflake phenomena he had witnessed earlier in the room, and then started with the conclusion.

“It will be made on top over there. If you open all the windows the top floor will get sufficiently cold enough. It’s a method that will work even if it doesn’t get below freezing. It’s fine just reaching near freezing temperatures.”

“Near freezing? Hey Jungwuya, near freezing temperatures in winter isn’t cold, it would be considered rather comfortably warm. Ice doesn’t even easily form until you reach negative 5 degrees celsius. So wouldn’t the Snow Blower just make rain instead?”

Jungwu nodded to the Director’s logical statements.

“Pure water actually freezes at negative 39 degrees celsius or lower. But snow isn’t simply frozen water. Ice star...oh I should call it Ice Nucleus, as long as there is a material to maintain the Ice formation, the freezing point can be much much higher. Whether it’s an impurity like dust or a granule that water molecules stick to...”

He imagined the process of the Ice Nucleus transforming into a snowflake star. Jungwu looked at the chemical composition of molecules gently wrapping the surface of the Ice Star.

“...like a man-made protein compound.”

“Protein compound?”

“Did you know that when there is formation of frost in the fall, the plants form a layer of ice at mere negative 2 degrees celsius?”

It's caused by a microorganism called *Pseudomonas*. This Microorganism has protein on the surface that acts as Ice Nucleus needed for ice to form. And so crops freeze at relatively higher temperatures."

Perhaps it was due to the calm manner he was giving his ideas, even the Director became engrossed in the explanation. It was then the Representative who was wanting to grasp at straws finally looked pleased.

Soochan who had been viewing the situation nervously finally calmed down when he noticed the two men's reactions.

"The ski resort built in the desert probably used this protein to mass produce snow that forms at a higher temperature, since it's cheaper to do this than to use the air conditioner to reduce the temperature by even one degree."

"So where can this protein be purchased?"

The Representative asked without being able to hold himself back. Jungwu scratched his chin and replied nonchalantly.

"*Pseudomonas* doesn't have all that of a complex genetic structure, so most chemical companies should be able to design a much more effective product..."

Jungwu suddenly stopped speaking.

“Excuse me, Mr. Representative. Would you mind if I called our company KG Chemicals to see if they sell it?”

“KG Chemicals?”

Because Jungwu was wearing a “Sing Company” entry tag around his neck, the Representative looked confused. Jungwu pointed towards his friend.

“I came today to help out a friend. I actually work at KG Chemicals.”

“So you worked for a Chemical company. That explains why you speak so differently from other stage crews I’ve seen. I would love to move ahead with the idea at the earliest convenience so please go ahead and give them a call.”

“Alright, please give me 3 minutes.”

After leaving the control room, Jungwu found his cellphone and dialed the number.

‘Please answer.’

The signal rang a few times, and luckily the person on the other end picked up the phone.

– Yes

There was a sense of intelligence behind this woman's voice.

“Ah, Doctor Moon. Sorry for calling so suddenly.

– Jungwu ssi? What do you need?

“I think I just ran into an opportunity to raise my work performance.”

Jungwu quickly summarized the events.

“So what we need is large amounts of specialized protein compound, and so I was wondering if KG Chemicals would have them in stock, and what are the processes of obtaining it.”

– ...You're making sales on weekends?

Doctor Moon's puzzled tone of voice was apparent even through the phone.

“I didn't come here to make a sale per se. First step is checking if we have this material in the material library at the Central Research Laboratory. So, do you know anyone who's hard-working enough to go to work on weekends?”

– Tell me then.

“Excuse me?”

– I’m close to where I can access the database so just tell me then.

“Doctor Moon, did you head to work today?”

– I am in the middle of making progress on my project.

Jungwu swallowed back his groan of surprise. Last weekend, she had stayed awake all night with him, and even this weekend she decided to go to work. Recalling that he had been complaining just this morning that he might be suffering from work addiction, he couldn’t help but feel that he had been naive in the face of a real workaholic.

Feeling humbled, Jungwu said,

“It’s a protein made by a microorganism called *Pseudomonas*. I don’t know how far the production stage has reached, but to begin, with we need Malonyl, Acyl Carrier Protein, and something that can act as coating for transacylase...”

After searching based on the chemical information that Jungwu provided, Doctor Moon finally answered.

– There is a record of producing a product called Super Snow Max. What’s this? It’s listed as a product targeted for Ski Resorts.

“That’s the right one.”

– It’s quite expensive. Although it showed 89% increase in the volume of snow, the note states that it was put on hold due to high production unit prices. There’s raw material stored in Paju Factory’s number 13 warehouse.

“How can I obtain them?”

– It’s a 24-hour production factory so as long as you place an order, it should work.

“I don’t know how contracts work so...”

– So why is a researcher involving himself in sales?

“I’ll explain when we meet later. 3 minutes are almost over. The Representative is giving me looks. I need the product within the next 2 hours.”

– I’ll give you the phone number of R&D Sales division’s Deputy. He’s our project supervisor, so he’s currently at the company.

Jungwu guessed that the man was probably forced against his will to come to work because of Doctor Moon, but Jungwu didn’t comment and gave her a reply.

“Thank you!”

After calling Sales Team 2’s Deputy named Sangchul Jo, Jungwu was able to get the answer that the product could be provided within the time constraint.

The price was agreed to at a higher premium for being a weekend rush order, but considering the Representative’s personality thus far, he probably wouldn’t mind the total.

Soon after, Representative Yum and his secretary stood before Jungwu.

“It’s a verbal contract, but the preparations will be done on time right?”

“Yes. And please make sure to deposit the money if it works.”

Jungwu thought of Deputy Jo who was rushing on his way with the materials for the artificial snow and said,

“Please keep one thing in mind. The Clean up after spraying a ton of snow into the interior of the building... My neighborhood gets chaotic when it snows every year. The neighbor across the street spends most of the time sweeping the snow, and when his wife came to nag once, she slipped and had cracked her hips. My mother is the head of Women’s Club, and she always goes to meet a grandma who claims that all you need to do is lay charcoal.”

Mr. Representative gave a smile.

“The value of advertisement for spraying real snow is much greater than the cost of cleanup. We already completed the agreement for artificial snow. All I can do is wait and hope that things go as planned.”

“You won’t have to worry about that. There is no such thing as fake or coincidence when the criterion for a chemical reaction is met.”

“Did you say you were a chemist?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I didn’t notice it before, but when I look at you, I get the feeling that it’s a very interesting area of study.”

“I am experiencing that for myself recently.”

‘Along with 3D VR mixing into my reality.’

—

By 6 30 pm, the shopping mall became packed with customers who came to watch the mini concert. Jungwu leaned against the rails on the top floor to look down.

It was the stage he had been helping set up since the morning. Behind it were the VIP guests. And beyond that were what appeared to be thousands of regular audience. Seeing them from such a height made them seem small and tiny.

“Oof so cold.”

He was wearing a glove, but he still felt the chill from the wind that blew in from the open windows.

‘If I were to convert a hotpack with the corrosive process like the last time the snow won’t form.’

There was nothing he could do but endure it and wait. The employees who installed and were waiting on standby next to the snow-making machine were also shivering in the cold.

Bee beep

– Jungwu ssi, when will Deputy Jo arrive?

Jungwu couldn’t answer the question asked over the radio. The Deputy was supposed to arrive already but was caught in traffic. He asked instead,

“Until when do we have to spray the snow?”

– Isul’s entrance is the cutoff line. One hour from the start of the

concert. If we don't then the customers won't be able to enjoy the event.

It meant the snow had to begin before 8 pm.

“Eh? Are you Director Kim?”

– That is correct.

“Why are you using elevated terms?*

– I'm showing deference. You just don't seem like someone I should be speaking plainly to.

“It's ok though. I'm Soochan's friend.

– I think it was a good thing that Soochan decided to bring Jungwu ssi today. The Representative is looking forward to the event. If we fail, this will be the last time for me to run the show in this mall.

“And if we succeed?”

– Then, how do I say this. You save the life of a person with the title of Business Vice President. And I will probably be given monopoly over all events that happen in this giant shopping mall.

“That sounds great.”

– If that happens, I will make sure to compensate properly.

Once 7 pm hit, the Mini Concert began with a spectacle.

The Girlgroup TOT took to the stage and gave an energetic introduction and began with their hit song ‘Go!’, which raised the atmosphere of the mall in mere moments.

Jungwu couldn’t take his eyes away from the stage despite stomping his feet to chase away the cold. The live show was definitely fundamentally different from the rehearsal.

“The right thing for the right time, stage performance really benefits from support devices.”

Lights and smoke; everything on top of the stage blinking and sparkling along to the rhythm drew in the audience’s attention.

Once two songs were over, the first Fireworks went off.

It was short, but it created an unmistakable image of chrysanthemum flower with the letters [TOT] clearly written in the center for a brief moment before disappearing. The fireworks gave a refreshing feel as they popped and illuminated the image. It was wonderful, like a magic show.

Bee beep

– Wow, what the. Jungwu ssi, just where did you learn to do that? I don't think even the H Innovation pyrotechnic experts can make something like that. And they are the ones who manage fireworks run by the City of Seoul during festivals.

“That's because they're only a 5th rank Chemical Company in the country. I work for KG Chemicals.”

Jungwu made a subtle inference at KG Chemical's 1st place position and let him know his company's greatness. He then resumed putting his attention back to the Girl group's enthusiastic performance below.

Thanks to the great intro, spectacle, and fancy fireworks, the applause of the visitors of the mall reached fever pitch. He even saw that there were people at the entrance that couldn't enter and were watching from outside.

As an event, this was most definitely a success.

And eventually, the 3rd group on the list came on stage.

“It's the Girlfriends!”

Jungwu shouted when he stopped himself.

‘Autograph’

For one reason or another, he was unable to get Yulhwi’s autograph.

‘Oh my god, that was the most important thing.’

Jungwu watched their performance from afar with a dull face. It wasn’t like he was in the front row with the best seats, so Jungwu became even more wilted.

‘Let me see! Zoom in!’

He couldn’t closely perceive the events on the stage even with the chemical worldview. Too many Dust Stars were dancing along to the rhythm, making everything look wavy.

‘All of you guys go away!’

He was waving his hand when his cellphone finally rang. It was the Deputy he had been waiting for.

“Hello, Mister Deputy? Back door? There should be a staff named Soochan Park there waiting so just give him the materials. If you hand the purchase receipt to Secretary Jung, they should transfer the funds right away.”

Although he didn’t get any signature on paper, Jungwu felt

confident everything was going to work out well. He quickly addressed the staff standing before the sedan-sized snow machine.

“The additive is on its way up. Please begin the snow machine. And you can start shooting as soon as the material is mixed.”

5 minutes later, the Elevator doors opened, and Soochan came running while pushing a cart filled with boxes.

“Jungwuya!”

“Hey, this way!”

A box was opened, and they mixed the powder in the plastic container with the label “Super Snow Max” into the water tank, and Jungwu nodded.

Vrrroom~!

The Engine gave a rawr as it began to work, and the nozzle of the snow machine began to blow water molecules from the humidifier. Jungwu was worried that the energy from the Dust stars might raise the kinetic energy in the air and chased them even further away.

‘Ok, now freeze!’

The humidity in the air first looked like white fog. But the water

molecules began to freeze rapidly and gather around small particles as they floated around. Soon the reaction Jungwu had seen a few hours ago was repeated.

‘It’s done.’

Chasing away the Dust stars was very helpful. There were more particles than perfect snowflakes, but this concentration of snow was still a success.

Soochan who was watching haplessly from the side suddenly opened his mouth.

“It’s...snow!”

“What did I tell you?”

A particle of snow became focused by Jungwu’s vision.

It was transparent and flat. It was a more perfect six-sided wings than any other snowflake he had ever seen.

‘Oh, you were made so well. Bye bye~’

The perfectly pure and clean snowflake gently floated down to the plaza below.

The Snow machine was connected to the fire extinguisher system of the building, so soon the snow machine began to bellow snow like a storm.

At the same time, on the stage.

[Isul ssi, please prepare to make a comment during the interlude.]

Isul was in the middle of singing her third song ‘Winter is Coming~’ when she saw the message pop up from the Stage use monitor. She sent the control room a quizzical look when she noticed it.

‘What do they mean?’

She had only worn an earpiece that played the accompaniment so she couldn’t ask directly. Once the verse was over, it was time for the guitar solo. The message on the screen surprised her.

‘Why this?’

Isul carefully opened her lips.

“Everyone, do you like snow?”

The crowd that had been listening enthusiastically answered happily with a “Yes!”

“Um...shall we look up at the sky?”

Once the comment was over, the lights moved as one and aimed at the Mall’s ceiling.

A brief moment of silence fell over the mall.

“What is that?”

“My goodness...”

Isul also looked up hearing the murmur of the crowds and couldn’t help but watch agape.

Snow.

Soundless snowflakes.

The air was filled with them.

The snow gently fell upon the heads of the guests below, and all of them were shocked.

[Isul ssi, the interlude is over!]

‘Ah’

– We should sometimes run forward without looking back on days like this so that we can leave footprints upon the white snow

The thin ice melted the moment it landed on the outstretched hands. It was just an ordinary symbol of winter, but it seemed so tender.

Couples leaned on each other's shoulders, and families grasped each other's hands. The guests enjoyed the unexpected gift happily.

‘It looks like we are inside of a snowball globe.’

Isul couldn't help but smile when she felt the pleasant sensation of something cold touch the hand she was strumming her guitar with.

– Since its snowing, since it's winter. Let's walk together through the whitened world...

Once the song was over, everyone gathered in the mall gave a standing ovation. To Isul. To the miracle from the sky.

When Isul read the message on her monitor, she immediately began to speak into the mic.

“They've turned off the heater. Please put on your coats. I'll

begin the fourth song.”

‘Zzzt PIIII’

While Isul was speaking she suddenly heard a strange sound from the right speaker and flinched.

Chapter 25 – Snowflake Serenade (7)

Director Mujin couldn't look away from the pouring snow as he muttered to himself.

“I didn't think that I'd get to see the first snow this way.”

Anyone who runs stage prep would dream of being able to recreate such a miraculous sight. And he saw other people around him who were feeling the same way.

“Jungwu, friend. Do you understand what kind of stunt you managed to pull off?”

People were looking up as if they weren't sure if they were indoors or out. Some were raising their hands up to touch the falling snow. Some giggling, some sharing this wondrous experience with someone over the phone.

Mujin felt proud because even he couldn't help but feel the same way as those people out there.

“I can afford to be impressed since we went this far.”

“Director sir! The Sound team is calling urgently...”

“Just a second, let me make a wish.”

Mujin made a personal wish ‘Please let me have a daughter by next year’ before he turned on the radio.

“What?”

– We don’t know if it is because of the snow, but the left speaker is beginning to make noise. It might be short-circuiting from the cable side. We would like to halt Isul ssi’s performance to inspect...

“No, you will ruin this atmosphere. Cut off the problem speaker and readjust the volume.”

– Director, the right speaker is also beginning to...

It was a situation where problems were bound to happen. Today’s setting was designed for indoor use, not outdoors.

“Please wait. Isul ssi’s performance is a live show. Just cut off the MR and leave only the center speaker. We only have the second half of the last song and an encore left.”

Mujin who didn’t want to ruin the perfect performance gave his instructions.

– And if the center speakers go out? Then the show itself is over. It could take a rapid turn for the worse.

This was the opinion of the sound director.

‘We might not be able to do an encore.’

Mujin came to a conclusion and was about to inform Isul via the monitor, when his radio turned on.

– Director, sir. This is Jungwu.

“Jungwu ssi, it was perfect. The Representative was overjoyed and is calling the media. I’m a little busy right now, so I will call you in a...”

– No, please don’t cut the line.

“Excuse me?”

– That issue you’re having. Isul ssi’s performance. Wouldn’t it be easier if we just stopped the snow from falling on the stage?

“Hmm? Do you have a solution?”

– If we install a chemical solution on the stage that can sustainably emit strong heat for about five minutes, the snow won’t be able to reach it. You know that hot air expands and rises, right? The snow won’t be able to pass through it and instead turn into droplets in the form of something resembling a fog.

“Why haven’t we done it yet?!”

– The problem is, I have to be the one holding whatever causes this reaction for the entire duration.

“What do you mean?”

– These guys cause quite a violent corrosive reaction so no one but me could hold it, is how I should explain it.

Mujin thought hard about what he was told.

It could only work for just five minutes.

But this short time was the perfect opportunity to capitalize and enhance the enjoyment the audience was experiencing through the unexpected snowflake surprise.

He felt that he would never be able to recreate a scene like this again. And because of this, he felt greedy.

“Jungwu ssi, if that’s the case, I have a condition.”

—

Once the final song was over and Isul stood up to bid farewell, the crowd chanted encore.

Isul gave a brilliant smile and said,

“The Director messaged me saying that speakers on either side of me are not working because of the snow.”

“It’s okay!”

“We’re happy just hearing your voice!”

As if she predicted this reaction, Isul quickly sat back down on her seat.

[Please comment for 1 minute. Center Speaker is still live.]

Isul smoothly began speaking upon the Director’s request.

“I actually don’t like the first snow all that much. My first love broke up with me during the first snow. Ah, it was unrequited love, so I guess calling it a break up is a little weird.”

Her comment lead to men of the audience to shout out ‘I will be your boyfriend!’ ‘My first love is Isul Yoon!’ ‘Let’s find happiness by next year!’.

“Thank you all.”

She had come a long way compared to when she first started out

and was too shy to speak to the audience. It was largely thanks to her fans who deeply cared for her well being.

Isul warmed up her fingers with her breath, and then placed her hand over the guitar.

“It’s snowing, the atmosphere is great. Should I sing a song I’ve only performed once as Encore? It’s a song I’ve considered adding it to the album a few times. So I guess you could call it a new song. You’ve all have come at a great time.”

The audience redoubled their focus on the stage, full of anticipation for what song she might sing for them.

Once the promised 1 minute passed, Isul began strumming the guitar and playing the music.

“Whenever~”

Unfortunately, a rather large snowflake fell on her forehead and caused her to wrinkle her eyebrows. It inevitably led to her melody being off and caused dissonance.

“Ah...”

Isul was shocked and stopped her song.

“P...please pretend you didn’t hear that!”

She shut her eyes real tight and lowered her head, putting her hands together in a prayer as if saying ‘please~.’ The crowd grinned at her cute reaction.

“Encore! Encore!”

The audience began to shout as if they went back in time before it happened.

“Ahah, I...Don’t actually like the first snow all that much.”

Once she began her familiar sounding comment, the audience gave a chuckle.

“The title is ‘Adolescent happiness’, it is a song I only sang just o...oh I can’t joke about this part, just twice now.”

Du ru ring~

She played a chord and began to quietly sing the song. Her voice which filled the entire plaza caused the crowd to fall silent and become mesmerized by her music, erasing the ruckus earlier as if it had never happened.

– Whenever I look at you, just staring at you blinds me.

Isul fixed her eyes on a female audience member as she gently

and tenderly sang her song. Wishing that Isul would sing to them too, the envious gaze of the audience focused on the lady.

– Whenever I am with you, quietly leaning sets me free

This time she gazed and sang towards a couple standing together and the couple leaned against each other lovingly.

She was about to say the next verse when she was startled by another static.

‘Center Speaker too?’

Luckily it was perfect timing to change to a new cord and conceal the sound. Thanks to her skill as a guitarist and songwriter, almost no one picked up the subtle change of the music.

[Isul ssi, please hold on for just a bit longer. The expert who created the snow will arrive soon. Just think of him as a part of the performance.]

Isul didn’t understand the message on the screen and tilted her head. But soon she began to feel warmth and began to look around.

It had to be a mistake. It was snowing so hard, so where could the warmth possibly come from?

When Isul breathed in to sing the next line, her eyes suddenly

grew wide in surprise.

Someone was climbing onto the stage from below.

When the person's face was finally visible after slowly climbing the stairs, she recognized who it was and found herself unable to look away.

– There will never be another, like the magic of first love. Or so I had believed...

The man who was slowly walking up to her was well matched for winter mood, wearing white hat upon white outfit.

– Tightly holding your most precious hand in mine and walking on an endless road

Isul felt that each step he took gradually brought warmth to her body. And it wasn't until when the person reached her side that she realized that the temperature itself was rising.

“Wow!”

“What is that?”

The plaza erupted in wonder. For some reason, the snow was avoiding the stage, as if an invisible barrier had been erected.

The snow burst into tiny little droplets at the boundary where the warm air and the falling snow touched, and the stage lights shone through them sparkling like starlight.

The snow, the soft fog, and the brilliant show of lights created a dreamlike atmosphere. And beautiful music filled the air.

Just the sight of such extraordinary spectacle took everyone's breath away.

And Isul who was sitting in the dead center of it all couldn't believe what she was seeing, and felt overwhelmed. However, she remained professional and continued to sing in spite of the situation.

– Whenever you're feeling tired, please think of this day, and find joy, of being together, the two of us.

The first verse was over. Isul switched off her mic before the chorus picked back up again and turned her head.

“What are you doing here?”

“I am protecting the last remaining speaker.”

Jungwu pointed at the hotpack in his hands.

“With this.”

Isul's eyes focused on the object. She added a beautiful and melodic key change that didn't previously exist and asked,

“By holding a Hotpack?”

“This isn't a normal hotpack. It has 6 hours worth of corrosion reaction condensed to about 5 minutes so... wait is it okay to have a conversation like this?”

“Who are you? Were you a stage performer?”

“Ah, me...”

The chords with key changes were coming to an end, and it was time to begin the second verse.

“Quiet!”

Isul quickly flipped the switch on her Mic.

—

Gijun Shin who was introduced by staff and given VIP seating was filming the show and was busy being amazed and amazed again.

‘4 years of freelance filming, I finally hit the jackpot.’

Just the video of Isul singing in the snow would have guaranteed a million hits. But the show after that man dressed in white appeared was the real deal.

Even Gijun who had been to many performances had never witnessed such effects.

‘Who is that man? New Singer? Dancer?’

Why would it matter, this video was guaranteed to become a media sensation. Gijun continued to film Isul’s performance feeling sad that only the ending of the song remained.

—

‘Hmm, this is way too hot.’

Jungwu frowned as he continued to watch the Dust stars vibrate in the air and transfer kinetic energy. Boiling hotpack was one thing, but with even these guys going out of control, the microscopic world was caught up in a maelstrom of sparks and lightning.

It was a scene he wanted to close his eyes and pretend wasn’t happening.

Luckily, Isul who was singing was apparently serene. Was she aware that a Dust storm had appeared around her and was busy performing a berserk dance?

The reason why he was standing there dressed like a magician was due to Director Kim's demands. And it was followed up by the representative's immense initiative of procuring a difficult-to-pronounce Italian name brand suit within 30 seconds.

‘So...hot...’

Due to the immense heat from the hotpack that couldn't be fully be blocked out by three layers of gloves, Jungwu was sweating profusely despite the winter cold.

– Come with me, my blinding light. Let us go, my joy in life

And through it all, Isul's singing voice was enough to wash away all the pain and discomfort he was feeling.

– Whenever you're feeling tired, please think of this day, and find joy, of being together, the two of us.

With the final lines the second verse was over and the entire shopping mall erupted in a standing ovation.

“Thank you, I am Isul Yoon.”

She stood up with her guitar and gave a bow. Jungwu clumsily followed suit and bowed as well.

[Jungwu ssi. If you're wearing that kind of outfit, you should be giving a bow like a medieval age european aristocrat.]

‘What?’

Isul read the message on the monitor and glanced at him urging him to do it. He then recalled Soochan's words. It was the rule in the industry that during unexpected events, anyone on the stage was expected to follow the teleprompter to the best of their ability.

‘Ah well...’

Jungwu couldn't help but move one of his legs back and make a wide sweeping motion with his right arm as he lowered his head.

The crowd responded unexpectedly well. Despite his inexperienced bow, there was applause. The crowd applauded back even when he waved at the 2nd and 3rd floor balcony.

‘Oh, these people are just happy.’

The final farewells were made and Isul turned to look at Jungwu.

“Just how...”

Pew~!

The 4th round of fireworks he had set up shot up over the stage.

Isul was caught totally unprepared and jumped up, hugging her guitar and shouting “Mommy!”

Jungwu instinctively reached out and grasped her by her shoulders and helped her regain her balance when she tilted slightly.

“Please be careful.”

She stared at him with wide-open eyes. Jungwu hurriedly removed his hands from her.

“Soochan told me there were few celebrities who get startled every time there is a firework. I guess Isul ssi is one of them.”

“That’s not true. I am really used to...”

“Here it comes again.”

“...? What?”

Pow powowow boom!

Isul was so startled by the fireworks she was about to scream but held herself by forcing her mouth closed. Jungwu couldn't contain his laughter when she glared at him in response, and so he turned his head instead.

Isul gazed up to watch the lights going off above the stage. Her jaws dropped when she saw the lights form an image of a Guitar with the words IS written on it.

“What? That’s... my guitar!”

“You’re right. I made it after seeing your guitar.”

“Who? You did?”

Jungwu nodded. Isul carefully inspected Jungwu.

“Just what kind of person are you?”

He was about to answer ‘Chemist’ like he did with everyone else today. But during this moment, wearing brand name suit for the first time, and recalling a comment on the 9th link on trending humor forum leaderboards, led Jungwu to answer this instead.

“I guess some call me [Magician](#). At least people on 1st line call me that.”

“As I thought.”

He meant it as a joke, so he was the one who was shocked when she accepted his explanation so readily.

“That hotpack, the string on my guitar, that snow, those fireworks... did you make it all with magic?”

“Why would I tell you?”

“Oooh”

“I don’t think this was the right timing to be astonished.”

“But it’s amazing, all of it.”

A joke was only a joke with the right person. Jungwu immediately revised his explanation.

“It’s magic...-like Chemistry.”

“[Isul unni!](#)”

When he heard a high pitched voice, Jungwu turned to see who it was and it turned out to be the entire cast of Girlfriends rushing onto the stage.

‘Eh?’

Jungwu had to swallow back a gasp when he saw Yulhwi right in front of him. They had met where he had never expected to meet her.

Yulhwi ran up to Isul and wrapped her arms around Isul's.

“Director suggested we all sing a carol, so we came up here. He mentioned the shopping mall representative made a special request or something. The bgm has to be played by Unni. They said half of the equipment short-circuited because of the snow.”

After speaking, Yulhwi turned to look at Jungwu who was nearby.

He didn't know what to say when he saw her gaze that seemed to say 'who are you?'. He couldn't possibly ask for an autograph in such a situation even though it was Yulhwi whom he held at the highest regard.

And maybe Soochan's words finally rubbed off on him? Yulhwi didn't seem all that amazing when she stood next to Isul. Just like Soochan wouldn't seem all that amazing if standing next to Jungwu. Although Soochan would probably disagree.

“Please excuse me then.”

Since he was done with his job, Jungwu was about to leave.

“Please wait.”

Isul suddenly stopped Jungwu.

“Could you please stay by my side?”

“Excuse me?”

Jungwu was panicking at the request that came out of nowhere.

“It’s too cold. I can’t play the guitar if my fingers freeze.”

“Aahh.”

Jungwu looked down at the hotpack when she said that.

It was almost done with the reaction and was nearing the end of its life. The snow blower was shut off so the snow wasn’t falling anymore, but the air was still cold.

“Sure, then.”

She had sung for a long time in the pouring snow with such a thin outfit. He was happy to do this for her. Jungwu gripped the hotpack that was going through the last bit of reaction and stood next to Isul.

All the previous singers also climbed onto the stage as well.

“We’ll sing ‘Look out the Window’ for everyone!”

Three mics were set up at the front of the stage, and once Isul was ready with the guitar, the charol began.

“I wanna sing next to Isul Sunbae!”

“Me too, me too!”

TOT and Girlfriends members all competed for a spot next to Isul.

Jungwu who had been standing right next to Isul unintentionally and accidentally experienced an unspeakable moment of happiness.

He was knocked around this way and that.

‘S...So good!’

Magician on 1st line reference-In [Chapter 19](#) if you recall Jungwu was giggling over funny videos and grumpy cats when he saw the headline ‘A Magician lives on the 1st Line’ on the 9th entry in the ‘Popular Today’ list which was actually the title of a video that showed Jungwu making the old man’s hair dance(he did this in Chapter 4, it was recorded by someone and posted online). 1st line means subway line 1(where it took place).

Unni: Female to female version of Oppa

Oppa: female to older male (only slightly older. Significantly older has different word)

Chapter 26 – Snowflake Serenade (8)

The spotlights were turned off and the staff members yelled “Good work everyone” before gathering just before the stage. They began the process of wrapping up by checking the speakers and inspecting the special effect equipment.

Jungwu gazed at the hotpack that had used up every last grain and had fully completed the corrosion process and said,

“You worked hard too.”

Despite the official concert being already over, much of the audience was still basking in the afterglow of the show and couldn’t find themselves to leave. But then the speakers from all around the mall began to broadcast a message.

-December special sales event. The sales will last for 24 hours from now, thanks to the snow that fell today. There will be a lottery gift event on the 1st floor accessories section starting at 8:30...

The announcement listed events on all the floors of the mall which were slated to last until closing time.

‘Eh?’

The customers filed out as if swept away by a flood.

Once Jungwu experienced firsthand how effective the commercialization of the emotions was, he couldn't help but let out an exasperated chuckle. Then his eyes met Isul's who was standing while hugging her guitar tightly.

‘Mmm...’

She must have been watching him all this time. He thought it might be awkward to suddenly turn away so he stared back at her. This had unintentionally gotten him a chance to see her in detail and he couldn't help but be amazed again.

‘Pretty, really. Enough to make Yulhwi look ugly in comparison.’

Isul wearing her full stage makeup was exuding such beauty that it was embarrassing to even look at her.

Especially her facial features like eyes, nose, and lips.

They were pretty enough to make his mind go blank. Her narrow shoulders looked a little lonely.

“Isul Sunbae! See you later again!”

Yulhwi yelled as she hopped off the stage.

Jungwu snapped awake at the sound.

‘Time to ask for auto...haa, nevermind. I don’t need it.’

Truth be told, he lost all desire to ask the Girlfriend’s autograph since a while ago. ‘Fandom’ was terrifying. It evaporates so easily.

“Excuse me.”

Jungwu looked back at her nervously when she spoke to him.

“My name is Isul Yoon.”

Jungwu made a quizzical look.

“I know.”

“When did you learn my name?”

Jungwu answered right away, recalling his morning.

“I heard your music being played on the bus. ‘Winter is coming’ was it?”

“That song was from two years ago. You have the autographed CD I gave you, right? If you would like to become my fan starting today, please give it a listen. Then if you like the song...”

Isul seemed to hesitate and was unable to finish her words.

Jungwu who was fiddling with the slowly cooling hotpack then thought of something and spoke up.

“About Mr. Spokesperson Sungjae Ji, please let him know that you can’t buy hot packs like this from a convenience store and not to buy a bunch of these instead of taking a heater with him. You might freeze to death.”

“You mean that hotpack that has a vibrating Activated Carbon which increases the rate of corrosion?”

Jungwu’s eyes grew wide at her response.

“You remembered.”

“I was thinking ‘this man doesn’t feel like a stalker’. Although I had no idea what you were telling me.”

Isul gave a brilliant smile.

“And about you. Not a staff member, not a magician. Then what are you?”

“I guess Chemist is most accurate.”

“Chemist?”

It seemed to have caught her attention because it was an uncommon profession.

Thanks to interacting with her from close up, Jungwu was able to learn that she had a tendency to stare at the object of her musing. It's just, he happened to be the target of her attention so he ended up looking away. Her prettiness was too much to bear.

“Isula!”

Manager Ji yelled for Isul from below the stage.

“What are you doing there? The parking lot is filling up with fans so we have to leave now. Otherwise, our fans will mix with fans of other groups and chaos will ensue.”

“Ah, I’m going.”

Isul hastily turned back to look at Jungwu and said,

“If you like the song... let’s meet again, the two of us.”

“Excuse me?”

Jungwu stared at Isul’s back who was quickly running off the stage.

‘What? What does this mean?’

Manager Ji noticed Jungwu and greeted him with his eyes before taking Isul and disappearing together into a prep room.

‘Ding dong.’

Soochan began to look around as soon as the elevator doors opened. Once he found his friend standing under the stage, he yelled out the name very loudly.

“Jungwuya! Wahahaha!”

Soochan ran up and then suddenly stopped as if stepping on breaks before Jungwu. And for whatever reason that got him so worked up, he had he began to speak so quickly that he was spitting as he spoke.

“That was crazy, you got to stand on the stage with Isul Yoon!”

“I guess so.”

“What kind of reaction is that? It’s a major major event! I took a picture from up there and put it in the group chat. The guys are going crazy.”

Jungwu checked his phone and saw that there were over three hundred unread messages. Even though most of them never

message, they were in an uproar when they found out he was with Isul.

“I couldn’t help but notice that Girlfriend and TOT were getting kinda close there. Looked like you were clubbing. How did you feel?”

“It happened so fast I’m feeling numb right now.”

There was no way he could be feeling numb after that. Jungwu only wished to keep the happy memory of having been pushed and bumped into by those ladies to himself.

“So what about Isul Yoon? Where is she? Did you speak to her?”

“She left with her manager.”

“She didn’t say anything else?”

Jungwu shook his head while looking in the direction she had left.

Let’s meet again, the two of us.

Jungwu shook his head because if those words meant what he thought it meant, then it made no sense at all. They lived in completely different worlds, and they had nothing in common, so how would they ever meet each other again?

‘It wasn’t meant to be.’

Jungwu returned his gaze to Soochan.

“Soochan, when do we get our pay?”

“Director will probably hand it over the moment you ask.”

“Let me change out of this first.”

He was on his way towards the staff room when Representative Yum and his secretary saw him.

“Jungwu ssi!”

Representative Yum raised his hands as soon as he discovered Jungwu. The man walked straight towards Jungwu smiling from ear to ear and grasped Jungwu’s hands.

“The artificial snow was really something. The marketing team took pictures to use for press release, and the response on the online articles are very positive. I would like to extend my gratitude once again.”

“All I’ve done is sell you the products our company already had.”

A very simple natural chemical knowledge utilized in the right place created such a positive reaction. This had been a very important lesson for Jungwu. The fact that everyday chemistry was every bit as fun as the complicated and complex chemistry used by professionals.

‘But, now I’m starting to get tired.’

He didn’t have a chance to grab dinner and had to move endlessly. Jungwu suppressed a yawn as he asked the Representative.

“Mr. Representative, where do I return this outfit to?”

“Please keep it. It is my present.”

“A...Are you sure?”

Jungwu was forced to stifle a groan as he looked down at the white fedora along with the white suit that can only be described as avant-garde.

Sure it was expensive, but this suit was not styled in such a way it could be worn outside. Even though it was the same color as the researcher’s gown, if he were to wear this to work he would be treated as a lunatic.

‘Unfortunately, I’ll have to give it to Jungchan to use for something a school event.’

Nonetheless, Jungwu expressed his gratitude.

“Thank you, I will treasure it Mr. Representative. I have to go finish up here so...”

“Jungwu ssi does not have to do the cleanup.”

Director Kim who was supposed to be in the staffroom was somehow already close by.

“You have already done so much for us, so there is no need for you to do more. Soochan, you escort Jungwu ssi home.”

Soochan’s face brightened up when he was essentially told to take off as well.

—

“Here they come!”

Once a van showed itself at the front of the TS Mall’s parking lot, the mob of fans raised their flashcards.

[We pray for the success of Isul Yoon’s 3rd Album!]

The window farthest to the back rolled down and Isul showed

her face, saying “I’ll work hard on it” as she waved to the crowd.

“I love you, Unni!”

Isul replied by forming a heart shape with her fingers towards the middle school aged fan who had shouted to her. And until the van completely left the parking lot and entered the main road, she did not stop waving.

Only once the fans were out of view did she close the window and took her seat.

Manager Ji who had been sitting in the passenger seat and watching Isul give her best until the very end finally said,

“It was hard right? Good work today.”

“It was fun.”

Isul made a smile for the Manager.

Seeing her rather unenergetic smile, Manager Ji couldn’t help but think

‘Of course, it was difficult. From the moment she entered the prep room until the moment she left the premise, she had to be on alert and be mindful of fans that might be hiding anywhere.’

Giving the same smile to everyone equally; that was the life of a star. Manager Ji understood that better than anyone, so he felt pity for Isul who was trying hard to keep a strong front.

Manager Ji made a fake cough after observing her for a moment and said,

“What are you talking about? I was talking to myself.”

Manager Ji rubbed his own shoulders as he said,

“Isul ran away today as well, and I had to report that up to the representative. Not to mention I will be hearing that Isul might catch a cold, being snowed on. Really good work today, Sungjae Ji.”

“Pfft”

Isul finally showed some vitality when she began to laugh at his joke, so Manager Ji was able to relax.

“Please don’t worry about me.”

“That is exactly why I am worried. You’re sleeping better nowadays, right?”

Isul hesitated before nodding.

“Please go to the Sleep Clinic. I’ve heard that they’re really good. Insomnia is said to be a sign that you’re not feeling well mentally...”

“Ah, so thirsty. Water, water.”

Isul cut off Manager Ji’s words and sought water. After drinking from the bottle her outfit coordinator handed her, she leaned back in her chair.

“I’ll take a nap.”

The van passed the side street and entered the wide main street. Manager Ji suddenly thought of something while watching the relatively open road and called out to Isul.

“Isul, are you asleep?”

“I still have my eyes open.”

“Remember that Hotpack that the staff member handed you in the storage room? Did you hear that he was the one who made the snow effect possible?

“Manager Ji, you didn’t watch the show, did you? He was standing next to me the whole time.”

“Ah...um...Producer Choi was begging me to have you appear in a

drama over the phone...”

The Manager made a fake cough as if he was caught between a rock and a hard place.

“I told you before. I can’t act.”

“I know. I made the same answer.”

Isul who had been looking like she was about to get some rest suddenly looked at the Manager with sparkling eyes.

“Is there any more information you know about him?”

“Producer Choi?”

Isul rolled her eyes. Manager Ji laughed as he answered,

“I think the name was Jungwu Han? I was able to hear a bit from Representative Daegil Yum that he’s not actually a part of the event company. He’s actually someone from KG Chemicals. That’s why he was able to come up with the idea of spraying the interior of the mall with artificial snow. Representative Yum seemed to have taken a liking to the man.”

Isul etched the name ‘Jungwu Han of KG Chemicals’ into her brain as she placed her hand over her heart. But then she remembered the last words she had said to him. And quietly

muttered “Why did you say ‘Let us meet again”, what were you thinking, stupid” and bopped her head with her knuckle.

Manager Ji checked his watch and then looked back.

“Isula, you won’t be going to the practice room, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go to Manager Ooh’s place.”

Manager Ji did not say another word to Isul who resumed leaning back in her chair and closed her eyes.

A clear night sky without a chance of snow.

Isul recalled the sensation of the cold snow melting on the back of her hand and made a pleasant grin. And then this inexplicable trembling feeling; It has been a long time since the last.

—

“I told you to just go.”

“It’s the Director’s orders. I have to make sure you get home safe. And you don’t look all that well.”

Jungwu was drunk and was walking up the hill while leaning against his friend. They had eaten [Samgyeopsal](#) with Soju and although his stomach was sated, his head was foggy.

Soochan pointed at Jungwu's face.

“You’ve got huge dark circles.”

“Yeah?”

Jungwu faltered in his step, and the surprised Soochan rushed to support him better.

“You didn’t even finish half a bottle, what’s wrong?”

“You’re right. Ugh, my head is spinning. I should wake up if we walk a bit more.”

But the dizziness did not dissipate even after they arrived at the front doors. In fact, Jungwu gripped the doors to his home when he finally emptied the contents of his stomach.

“Oof.”

“You okay?”

After clearing his stomach and finding relief, Jungwu motioned

for Soochan to leave.

“It doesn’t look like you’ve lost consciousness or anything. You’re acting kind of weird.”

“Maybe it’s because I’m sleepy. I’ll fix this here so run away. You know my mom’s personality, right?”

“She’s the same? Ok, I’ll go. Today was the best. I’ve never been so proud of the fact that Jungwu Han is my friend.”

“Stop it with the gross talk.”

“See you.”

Jungwu waved his friend goodbye and opened the gates.

‘Creak~’

His arms got goosebumps due to the severe sound from the metal grating. He picked up the broom and trash bin at the corner of the yard to get at least some of the mess at the entrance cleaned up.

‘I’ll do the rest tomorrow.’

He then passed through the yard and entered the entryway.

“I’m home.”

Jungwu took off his shoes and entered the living room. Jungchan who was watching the TV inside turned to see who it was.

“You’re late.”

“Where’s Mom?”

“She’s sleeping.”

Whew. His brother, who was watching Jungwu, let out a sigh of relief and turned apathetically to resume watching the TV. Jungwu shed his clothes to prepare for a bath before he stopped to yell down the hall at the living room.

“Chana, want to go to PC Bang tomorrow? Hyung will pay!”

“It’s finals until next weekend. Also, I will never play a ranked Pentawatch game with you, hyung. Not even if you buy me skins.”

“Fidgety brat. Fine.”

Jungwu finished his shower in the blink of an eye and resolved to play alone on Sunday. He wiped his hair with a towel and lumbered his way up to the second floor. He was so overcome with sleepiness that he fell asleep as if passing out.

Next day, ‘Cling,’ Jungwu woke up to the sound of a message notification from the cell phone.

‘What time is it?’

When he looked at the time on the cell, it was 7 am. Although he didn’t oversleep, compared to the rest of the week he felt like he had quite a long rest.

When he pressed the button to check who had sent the message, it was someone rather unexpected.

[When should I send you the Coating material you had requested?]

‘Boyoung Sunbae?’

[Whenever it is convenient for you, Sunbae]

Jungwu was deciding between lazing around on the ground or waking up after he had sent a reply when he heard a sound of someone noisily making their way up the stairs.

This kind of sound normally can’t be heard except for when Madam Hong was enraged.

‘Eh?’

Jungwu recalled the bin of vomit he had left in the corner of the yard.

‘Crap!’

‘Woosh’

“Jungwu Han!”

“Mom, I’m so sorry. I was feeling strangely unwell yesterday. I’ll go clean the yard right away.”

Jungwu jumped up like a frog and bowed low to the ground before her when Jisook Hong tilted her head.

“Yard? What is this about?”

“Hmm? What are you mad about then Mom?”

“Did you get drunk and throw up all over the place?”

Dang, he reported something he wasn’t getting in trouble for. Jungwu stood up and decided to ask Jisook.

“Then what’s going on this morning, Mom?”

“What did you do to the front gates? I know it’s old but why did

you have to draw on it?”

“What?”

—

Jungwu couldn't help but let out a snort when he saw the front gates. In the middle of the rusty gate, there was a brand new red hand-shaped figure that wasn't there before.

‘Only this area is newly corroded!’

It made sense that his mother would mistake this as a drawing. It was a deep color as if it was newly peeled. Placing his left hand over the gate where the rust had formed, it perfectly recreated his vomiting position from last night.

‘There is not one shred of doubt that I caused this.’

After checking with the zoomed in chemical vision, he noticed that this was a drastically accelerated corrosive reaction. Particles of sweat, Iron Hydroxide, and Iron Oxide remained as evidence.

“Wait.”

It needed testing.

Jungwu placed his hand over another part of the front gates and focused on the dust stars.

The oxygen and water molecules of his sweat pulled the dust stars from the iron and created a large volume of Ions. And when he took a closer look, a gathering of those ions formed a red particle star and flung itself towards the metal surface, almost instantly creating a crimson rust landscape.

This was the cause of the rust handprint.

‘I see, there are quite a lot of reactions that can be coaxed by manipulating the dust stars.’

It was a fact that most chemical reactions known in the world involved the manipulation of free electrons; Jungwu stared at his palm.

‘That aspartame incident at the company outing last Friday, and now this. This isn’t simply an ability of a Molecular Chemist, is it?’

Jungwu felt a chill crawl up his spine when he began to feel like he had become a character found in a Hollywood movie, like a hero hiding his identity.

But then, he heard the sound of slipper being dragged across the yard and saw his mother emerging from the other side of the yard.

“Jungwu. Since you have a day off today, apply lubricant to the

gate with Chana...”

Jisook stopped. She discovered a second handprint above the original one.

“You...”

“Wait, mom. I’ll explain. This isn’t a drawing, this is a super fast corrosive reaction! This is Iron Hydroxide and this is Iron Oxide... Ack! Don’t slap me in the back!’

No matter what ability he had gotten, he was nothing more than a son at home. Jungwu came to realize this very well as he escaped to the inside of the house.

Code: AF-12

Case: Static master

Research: (Identical)

Feedback: Continual use is improving the effectiveness of control over the Free Electrons. It is expected that training should improve influence even further.

** National Sister ** I’ve been requested to give an explanation of what this ‘title’ means.

So a little bit of background.

There is a kind of ‘special’ recognition for stars on Korean TV that are so well known that they began to be called ‘People’s’ something. The portion after ‘국민’ is kind of a silly nickname used to distinguish them. But the nickname (in spite of the fact that some of them can be taken as sort of an insult) commands enormous respect and recognition.

For example, there was an MC (Master of ceremony) that was so well known and widely popular that he became known as ‘국민MC’ ‘People’s MC’. This kind of title is somewhat informal, yet formal. For example, there is no governing body that ‘issues’ the title. It just kind of happens, spreads online and becomes common place. There is a man called ‘국민약골’ meaning ‘People’s weakling’ and another who has the title ‘국민할매’ ‘People’s grandma (he is a rock star, but visually looks like a granny due to age and long hair)’. Isul is called 국민여동생, literally “People of the nation’s younger sister”.

But wait, if the literal meaning is ‘people’s [X]’, why not go with the same format?

Calling her ‘People’s younger sister’ sounded too communist in English. Since South Korea is specifically NOT communist, it felt like using this title literally would be too misleading and politically charged. Hence, a much more neutral and safe ‘national’ or ‘nation’s’ has been used which is the other alternative to People’s.

*Samgyeopsal - Literally means three fold skin, this is the most popular pork dish in South Korea with 85% of the population voting for this dish. The meat itself is from the stomach portion of

the pig and is fried in a self-draining grill placed on the dining table. The customers themselves cook the meat and is provided all the tools to do so.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samgyeopsal>

Chapter 27 – General List (1)

Tssst

Jungwu was spraying WD-40 to erase the rust mark when he recalled the events of this morning and shook his head.

‘I thought she would be happy, but she only got worried.’

When he explained to her briefly about becoming employed at KG Chemicals, the only thing she said to him was to be wary of being scammed.

It had only been a week since he had had trouble finding a place of employment. It must have been difficult for her to accept that Jungwu was suddenly employed at a corporation, wearing into a nice suit.

‘And it’s difficult to explain that I was lucky.’

Because of it, he couldn’t find it in himself to tell her that his first paycheck would total almost \$10,000 dollars. A random stranger might be able to accept this news easily, but a mother was someone who knew you very closely, and would do nothing but worry.

He had only taken pills that increased his senses; it wasn’t like he himself had changed. Although he could spout off random knowledge, he couldn’t possibly survive any regular standardized test.

‘Chana too, I don’t have anyone I can talk to about this.’

Jungwu let out a sigh.

Jungwu decided to defer explanation to everyone, including Soochan, until after the contract period was over. He refocused his attention on lubricating the gateway.

Soon,

Jungwu opened and closed the gate a few times to test his work. So as to not disturb the neighbors, he decided that it was enough and stopped.

‘Where was the paint again?’

He searched in the corner of the yard for the can of green-colored paint he had bought long ago. Of course it would be amazing if he could use Yujin Chemical’s total care system, but using such an expensive coating on a front gate was the very definition of overkill.

“Jungchan! Get out here and paint!”

He called for his younger brother.

Jungwu wiped away the grease from the WD-40 with a towel and

was preparing the paint roller when his cell phone began to ring. The caller ID showed Boyoung's name, so he thought 'Why is she calling now?' and answered the call.

“Hello?”

– Jungwu-ssi?

“Huh?”

Perhaps because his response was strange, he could hear a startled voice on the other end.

– Ah, did I call the wrong number?

“I am Jungwu-han, but who are you?”

– This is Boyoung. Eh? Did you not save my number? Wow, so mean. Just because you're good at Chemistry.

“Why are you dissing knowledge of Chemistry like this?”

The reason Jungwu was surprised was because she had not called him 'Parachutter-ssi' for whatever reason.

– Please wait, I'm in a taxi right now. I am at the intersection where 'Ilmyung Mart' is at, which direction is it to your house?

“Ah you’re at Ilmyung Ajussi’s mart, then you can head up the hill to the right towards...”

Jungwu stopped.

“What did you say?”

– It’s a delivery.

Like a dark omen, the memory of receiving that text in the morning resurfaced.

Roughly 30 seconds later, a taxi stopped before the front gates. Jungwu’s expression went blank when he saw Boyoung exit the taxi, struggling to pull an aluminum bin out of the back seats.

“Could you help please? This is quite heavy.”

Jungwu moved closer to help with the bin containing the coating material.

“You didn’t have to come all the way to bring this.”

“Well we should help each other out. We work for the same Laboratory after all.”

Boyoung gave a brilliant smile with her unmade-up face. The fact that she was wearing comfortable-looking jeans instead of work clothes made her look like an early year college kid.

Jungwu shook his head, detecting the overly energetic charisma from her.

‘I feel like she’s planning something but I’m not able to grasp what it might be.’

Jungwu put down the coating material before his front gate before turning to check on Boyoung who had yet to stop her sunny grin.

“What is it that you want, pressuring me like this?”

“Pressure? Non non. Oh wow~ so this is where Jungwu-ssi lives, eh?”

Boyoung tiptoed to try and see beyond the wall, but she was of such small stature that she could barely see above Jungwu’s shoulders. Even so, Jungwu stood before her to stop her from pretending to peek into his house.

“Don’t dodge the issue, tell me what it is.”

Boyoung gave him a troubled look when he kept on asking for what it was about.

“I mean...well, it’s not like I was thinking of anything in particular. It’s just, I reckoned that Hoobaenim’s gates was getting rusty and all. So I thought that I might as well...”

“I see. I did not realize that you were such a kind-hearted Sunbaenim.”

“Right? Professor Chun recognized my benevolence early on...”

“Thank you for your thoughts. Sunbaenim, see you tomorrow at the lab.”

When Jungwu ended the conversation in a way that was as smooth and cold as running water and quickly turned his back to her, her cheeks puffed up in unhappiness.

“Cheapskate. How can you be so cold? I mean, I thought if I went so far as to show such kindness, we might be able to have a conversation over coffee. I couldn’t sleep in the morning because I was mulling over some stuff, and decided to come over.”

Jungwu couldn’t help but break into a grin when he heard her speech full of complaints. Whatever she wanted to talk to him about was most likely related to Chemistry.

‘Someone I can speak to...’

Jungwu turned back again and asked,

“Didn’t Sunbaenim say that she was going to buy coffee? As opposed to a meal.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, since you’ve come to my town I’ll pay.”

Boyoung’s expression brightened up again.

“But what did you want to talk about on a weekend anyway? If it’s about Professor Chun, I refuse.”

“I have no intention of asking from someone who is unwilling to talk about it. It’s actually related to an article that I’m reading. I thought you might know something about it.”

“Well, if it’s that. Please wait just a bit. I’ll paint this quickly.”

Clatter clack

Meanwhile, the gates opened and Jungchan walked out wearing a tracksuit as he yawned.

“Where is the paint br...”

Jungchan couldn't contain his surprise when he noticed Boyoung standing in front of the house.

“You grab the roller instead of the brush.”

“Uh? Uhh??”

Jungwu laughed while watching his brother wordlessly and repeatedly look back and forth between Boyoung and himself.

Boyoung was objectively beautiful. Her cute facial features were naturally eye-catching.

Boyoung moved herself right next to Jungwu and asked,

“And who is he?”

“He is my younger brother. Even though he looks like a mountain bandit, he's just a Junior year student in high school.”

“Wow.”

Boyoung's jaws dropped while staring at Jungchan.

“Are you really that shocked by the fact that he looks older than he actually is?”

“I’m just envious of people who look mature.”

Jungwu glanced at the lady who couldn’t escape the appearance of early 20s before addressing his still-stunned brother.

“Chana, greet her. Company Sunbaenim.”

“Company? You mean that place you part-time at?”

“No, I explained this morning. I intern there, not work part-time.”

Boyoung who excelled in intrapersonal relationships waved ‘hello’ at him. Jungchan’s face heated up as he turned bright red, replying with “Ah, hello” before suddenly turning when he recalled Jungwu’s words.

“Su, Sunbae?!”

“Why are you surprised? Her age is close to mine. She’s totally a Noonim to you. We’re wasting time, let’s paint.”

The gate was small and it took only 5 minutes to paint the whole door.

Boyoung wordlessly watched the two brothers work together in repairing the gateway while sitting on the steps to the house.

Jungwu opened the bin containing coating material.

“Hyung, what is this?”

“Quasicrystal coating material. The thing Sunbae over there developed.”

Jungchan turned to look at her.

Boyoung made a V sign. Jungchan’s face grew bright red again and immediately looked away. Boyoung grinned and returned to looking at her cellphone.

“So what does this do?”

“Do you want me to explain it to you? The theory behind Quasicrystal might be difficult for a liberal arts major like you.”

“Hey, I get good grades.”

Jungwu nodded as if to say ‘right, right’ and began to speak.

“Some solids have a repetitive and regular molecular structural pattern. Those are called crystalloids. Then there is stuff like glass and plastic molecules which have fairly randomly arrayed molecules; they are called Amorphous solids. A Quasicrystal lies somewhere in between those two categories and is special because it exhibits all the characteristics of both...”

Jungwu was able to explain without pausing. He continued to speak without a break for a whole minute while they covered the side of the gate facing the house with the coating material.

“Hyung.”

“Hmm?”

“Are you really our Hyung?”

Jungchan was staring in shock at Jungwu who was able to smoothly explain the fundamental theory behind a material he had never seen before in his life. Then he realized something and seemed to flinch.

“Now that I think of it, Hyung, you seemed like you’ve been possessed for the last few days.”

“I have been possessed. By Chemistry.”

Jungwu shrugged his shoulders. Jungchan was shocked at his reaction and asked,

“Hyung... are you in a pyramid scheme?”

“What are you saying? Aren’t you supposed to be impressed right now?”

“How much did you buy this for? And the Sunbae Noona over there is also doing that, right? Working as door-to-door salesmen.”

Jungwu gripped his brush tightly when he heard such unreasonable misunderstanding.

“What are you saying?”

“But it’s like that! Suddenly wearing a suit. Coming home late every night, not explaining what you were up to.”

“I already told you that I am working at KG Chemicals, did I not? You think a major corporation is crazy enough to dabble in pyramid schemes?”

“Anyway don’t do it. The mortgage on mom’s restaurant all went to you. If you cause problems now before you even pay that off...”

“Shut your stupid mouth!”

Jungchan dodged Jungwu’s punch and escaped towards the house.

Bang clatter clack boom

Boyoung paused from checking her phone with a ‘Hmm?’, and turned to watch as the two of them began fighting and running

around the yard.

—

Cafe at a large intersection.

Jungwu was sitting next to the windows along with Boyoung who continued to giggle about something, so he asked her a question.

“What would you like to drink?”

“Pyramid scheme... wow Jungwu-ssi’s brother is so funny.”

“I already understood that you found it funny, so please stop laughing.”

“How did such a misunderstanding start?”

“I see, a very bitter triple-shot coffee for you then.”

Jungwu stood up immediately and headed towards the cashier when Boyoung shouted,

“A very sweet Mocha Latte please!”

Soon after, Jungwu returned to his seat with a tray of the

ordered drinks.

“Thank you, Jungwu-ssi.”

“It’s repayment for the coating material.”

“This doesn’t even cover the transportation fee though? I didn’t know the way and had to take the taxi...”

“Should I drink and leave immediately?”

“No, no, wow what a great atmosphere this cafe has~”

Boyoung who had sneakily changed the topic picked up the mug and gave a bright smile.

“I’ve had a good laugh for the first time in a while.”

“My brother is smart, but he’s still naive about the world.”

“He was cute though, oh well. Should we get to the main topic?”

Jungwu saw Boyoung place a packet of A4 papers on the table and asked,

“What thesis do you need my opinion on?”

“The one I mentioned before. Professor Chun’s thesis. Please take a look.”

Jungwu picked up the thesis.

‘Next Generation Biocode?’

Few pages later he was able to confirm that this was a theory about a brand new perspective on the analysis of DNA. It was authored by Professor Chun, but he couldn’t recall anything specific about it. The only thing he could infer was what the process would be.

Because it was not something he could understand intuitively, he had to read it for some time.

‘Wait, there was another one that was similar to this which I couldn’t readily obtain info on.’

It was the Perfect Man project. The note that was attached to the file folder.

Jungwu thought maybe this document was one of the foundational theories in the development of ‘AF-12’ so he read the document with close attention.

His prediction was right.

In the theory was information about DNA that seemed to allude to 'AF-12'.

'But this isn't enough.'

The material used in the pill.

At first, Jungwu had thought that it was a protein compound that delivered chemical knowledge, but from what he had experienced in the last week, he knew that there was something more.

The ability to detect and analyze down to the molecular level.

The ability to gather or release electrons with his palm.

The ability to directly influence specific particles and bring about changes.

He was able to bring about and observe phenomena that could rightfully be called magic.

Jungwu thought that perhaps if he were to study this thesis that Seunggook Chun had proposed in Germany during his younger days, then he might be able to get a better grasp of what 'AF-12' was.

While Jungwu was staring intensely at the thesis, Boyoung who was slowly sipping away at the Mocha Latte periodically glanced at Jungwu's eyes.

Once twenty minutes or so had passed, Jungwu asked without taking his eyes off the paper.

“Why do you keep looking at me like that? Is there something on my face?”

“Were...weren't you looking at the thesis?”

“I've just finished. But then I noticed Sunbae staring at me, so I was wondering why you were doing so.”

“I was just looking you know? I was thinking you look like Professor Chun when you focus.”

“Ah ha.”

Perhaps embarrassed about being caught staring, she turned her gaze away towards the mug she held in her hands.

Jungwu placed the thesis back onto the table before asking.

“I'm just curious, did you like Professor Chun?”

“Yes of course, as someone worthy of respect.”

Jungwu’s gaze settled on Boyoung’s fingertips which were still holding onto the Mocha Latte. He saw evidence of detergent.

“Did you succeed with today’s laundry?”

“It was very success...”

Boyoung who was easily baited glared at him.

“A serious advice from someone who also can’t do laundry very well: just leave it to professional laundry services.”

“Did you make a random guess, or did you see something?”

“Does it matter? So, what’s your question on this thesis? I’ll try to tell you as much as I can answer.”

“Wait a second.”

Boyoung began to look around Jungwu’s face as if she was intent on discovering something too.

“I can see it, I can see.”

“You can see?”

“I can’t see!”

‘Cheh.’

Boyoung let out a sigh and then asked immediately.

“It’s the part on Meta Genomics. I understand the bit about snipping bacterial DNA to insert new information, but it doesn’t explain anything about the much larger scale shotgun sequencing. I feel like that segment would be the most determining factor in the speed of Bio Coding”

“Ah, that. You can collect samples from a beach with low biodiversity...”

Jungwu and Boyoung began to converse using technical terminology that sounded like alien speech, hearing which nearby customers watched them with wide open eyes, saying ‘Whoa’ all the while.

—

A relaxing Sunday noon. In a cafe filled with dating couples, Jungwu and Boyoung had discussed enthusiastically for more than three hours over their thoughts on the thesis. The ordered coffee mugs had been filling the table one by one.

“Have you seen this thesis before?”

“No.”

“As I thought.”

“It helped you right?”

“Of course. Also felt the wall.”

“Wall?”

Boyoung pointed towards Jungwu, the wall.

“Should I be honest? In Germany and here, I’ve always been told that I’m a talented prodigy. But how is it possible that Jungwu-ssi who seems to have randomly dropped out of the sky is able to impress the said prodigy?”

“I can’t even tell if that’s supposed to be a praise or... we have stayed here for too long.”

“We should get up.”

Jungwu took the empty mugs to the collection area before addressing Boyoung.

“Sunbae.”

Boyoung who was on her way out turned back to look at him, filled with anticipation to talk more.

“Where would I be able to find theses written by Professor Chun?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I want to try reading them.”

Boyoung replied with surging vigor showing in her eyes.

“It wouldn’t be easy to obtain them in Korea. Unless you know plenty of people from the Heidelberg University Biochemistry Center like I do.”

“In that case...”

Jungwu looked at Boyoung.

“Can I borrow some theses from Sunbae?”

“What’s in it for me?”

“Oh right. I don’t need them immediately so don’t worry about it

then.”

Boyoung hastily replied to Jungwu who had instantly given up.

“I’ll be generous. Let’s meet occasionally like this and I’ll show you.”

“I don’t...”

“Next week’s Sunday?”

“Are you sure it’s out of generosity?”

Boyoung left the cafe pretending like she hadn’t heard it. Jungwu watched her leave as he scratched his chin.

‘I didn’t realize the passing time.’

It was a completely different feeling from when he hanged out with Soochan yesterday. The dialogue turned out better than he had expected. He wondered if this was what a conversation between coworkers was like.

‘Aww, tomorrow is another work day.’

The new hires who were being wary of him would all be split up after the Proposal Assessment tomorrow as the training period

would conclude.

‘Where will I end up?’

And what would he experience this upcoming week?

Furthermore, he would give his best for the Proposal Assessment that he would participate in, but he could not guess what division he would end up in and under what conditions. And it wasn't like there was any guarantee that Doctor Moon was a person of influence in such regards.

Jungwu stretched his arms before opening the doors to the cafe.

“Sunbaenim, please keep your promise and buy lunch before you go.”

“You said you were fine with just coffee.”

“Well never mind then.”

“Which place is good around here?”

Chapter 28 – Generalist (2)

Afternoon 1 PM.

Gathered in the hallway outside the conference hall on the third floor were a group of young men overflowing with tension.

Six individuals selected in fall as temporary hires and the one and only special case individual selected in December who was also the greenest most junior member of the lab, were here to prepare for the Proposal Assessment that was going to take place in an hour.

“Is everyone present?”

Manager of Human Resources Younghak Jun stood before them with the roster.

“I will call out the names in the order of the presentations. Pilho Kim?”

“Here.”

The temps began to form a line in front of the Head in the order they were called.

‘He’s the Head of Training, right?’

Jungwu’s name didn’t come up until even the fourth call. He

knew that his position would be towards the end. He was relieved because going later would give him a chance to observe how others did which would be advantageous for him.

“...[Sunghwan Jo, Jungwu Han](#).”

Then Jungwu realized that there was nothing more to the arrangement than being ordered in alphabetical order (korean letters), and let out a laugh.

Had he ever been more grateful for being born with a last name having an ‘h’ sound?

“There is a 5 minute time limit on the presentation, followed by a 5 minute question and answer period. We will give you 3 minutes as a mic test. We typically don’t do practice beforehand but as everyone knows, the Research Head and the Department Heads...”

The Human Resource Manager Jun trailed off his words as he opened the doors to the conference room. It seemed as though the manager was as nervous as the presenters as the one responsible for the training of the temporary hires.

‘Crap I’m getting nervous because everyone else is so frozen stiff’

He did feel that he was adequately prepared, but Jungwu couldn’t help but feel his mouth going dry. He followed the people in front of him into the room.

The conference room was in a steplike layout, similar to a college lecture hall. There were laptops and mics installed on every desk on the semicircle steps, a large projection screen hung at the front facing the desks, as well as a white dry erase board.

“Ah ha, Mic test one two three. First presenter, please come forward.”

The oldest of the temporary hires, Pilho Kim at thirty-four years of age, stepped up to the podium at Manager Jun’s voice.

Jungwu sat on the chair in the corner and began to watch the practice proposal presentations.

‘Now that I think of it, this is my first time finding out the research topics that others have picked.’

Pilho’s PT’s title was ‘Heat Insulation Coating for Glass’. The presentation on the subject of liquid heat insulation project for exterior Apartment windows or cars filled the meeting room with a completely anxious voice.

“Pilho ssi. Your content was good but you lack confidence. Do you really think that the Fundamental Element Laboratory Researchers will want to work with you? Exert yourself more.”

“Ah, yes understood, manager-nim.”

The Human Resource Manager gestured to the next presenter.

After the first practice presentation, Jungwu tilted his head as he suddenly thought.

‘This seems like a rather stale subject...’

He shook his head to convince himself it wasn’t true and turned his attention towards Gitae who was making his way up to the podium.

Gitae’s PT was on a research about Solar power. He seemed to be on good terms with the head of Team 1 Donggil of the Central Research Laboratory and had picked a research topic that simply debated the efficiency of ‘Semiconductor N and P’ used in solar panels.

‘This is rather ordinary as well.’

Even the research topics of Gyumin and Yungshik who gave their presentation afterwards were extremely pedestrian, like ‘Display’ and ‘Green Energies’.

At least the fifth speaker Gaehyung Yi spoke about a brand new type of adhesive that was made of components extracted from Mussels, but this PT’s content was simply poorly done. To Jungwu, it looked like the presentation material prepared by others were nothing more than an announcement intended to show each of their desired departments what research they would like to participate in.

– What could newly hired temp researchers possibly propose that could compete with the professors?

Jungwu recalled an advice from a certain senior researcher during the company outing few days ago.

“...Jungwu Han ssi?”

Jungwu jumped up to his feet when he was woken up by the Manager’s call.

“Yes, on my way!”

“Please try to relax and take it easy. Jungwu Ssi’s preparation period was short and all, so the judges will take that into consideration when scoring you.”

Jungwu didn’t reply and only grinned as a response to the Manager’s considerate words as he waited for his own PT material to appear on the screen. He then moved up to the mic.

“I would like to develop a cheap recyclable plastic material that has at least the 5 times the hardness of steel.”

Human Resource Manager Jun who was checking the sound system turned his head towards the podium when he heard Jungwu’s energetic voice and attitude that was fundamentally different from the other presenters.

“Plastic’s drawback is that it has a lower heat resistance and hardness compared to metals. This is because the majority of the plastic is actually composed of noncrystalline structure...”

The basis of his proposition, steps and procedures, research ideas needed to complete the goal, as well as existing precedents, Jungwu’s practice presentation was over before the 3 minutes were up.

“...That is all.”

Manager Jun’s expression looked rather complicated due to the fact that the presentation was no different from listening to one of the Project Leads presenting a research abstract during one of the company’s official project announcement events.

Jungwu spoke into the mic on getting no instructions from the Manager.

“Sir, I’m finished. May I climb down?”

Manager Jun snapped awake and nodded.

“Ah.. ok. Oh yeah, Jungwu ssi?”

“Yes?”

“Were you scouted from another research institution for the topic you just presented? I haven’t received the file for you from the Human Resource department.”

“No, that’s not it. It’s just a topic I’ve had an interest in for a while.”

Once Jungwu sat down, the rest of the temps began to stare at him. Especially Gitae, who had witnessed a similar scene few days ago during the Seminar held in the City Hall.

Once everyone was done, Manager Jun walked to the front of the Podium.

“Please remember your routes. We will begin standing by about 10 minutes before the start time. You have a break until then.”

“Jungwu ssi.”

Gitae caught up to him on his way out. Jungwu bowed his head but Gitae immediately asked,

“There was a rumor floating around that Yujin Chemical was scouting you and even sent an offer... is this true?”

“Something like that did happen that day, but there’s a rumor about it going around?”

“We all watched the interview together on the news.”

“Ah...”

Gitae stared at Jungwu’s apparent ambivalence with envy and other complicated feelings.

“Wait for me!”

Sunghwan ran up from behind and placed himself next to Jungwu before asking

“Jungwu ssi, your presentation just now. When were you able to prepare like that?”

“Whenever I had time.”

“I noticed since the last end of the week meeting we had, but man you’re sensational. It was interesting to see Manager Jun’s surprised expression as well. How did you manage to study Polypropylene while pursuing business admi...”

Gitae also began to eagerly express deep interest in Yujin Chemical’s Mobile Research Station and asked questions as to what was inside. They must have determined that he was a rival they simply could not hope to match, as they showed no signs of being wary of him.

“I want coffee. How about you, Jungwu ssi?”

“I’m fine with water.”

Gitae and Sunghwan headed towards the vending machine when they returned to the break room. Jungwu walked over to the water dispenser and held the plastic cup.

‘Hmm?’

He suddenly saw his vision zoom in onto a small point in the break room which revealed a darkish rather raggedy and transparent comet-shaped molecular star floating around in the air.

‘What is it? That color makes it seem like it would smell horrible.’

Jungwu retraced the direction the molecule had traveled until he discovered a lady sitting in the corner of the breakroom with a large straw hat pressed down far into her head.

She was leisurely enjoying her tea when she flinched upon noticing his gaze and lowered her face. But although her face was covered, Jungwu was able to recognize her immediately thanks to the name that was proudly embroiled onto her white gown. Jungwu gulped down a cup of water and calmly walked over and sat right across from her.

“You smell rather savory today, Boyoung Sunbae.”

Boyoung looked away as if she hadn't heard him. Jungwu slowly observed the comet-shaped molecules floating all around her as he asked her,

“I guess there was too much ammonium in the compost? Bacillus fungus? Is this being cultivated to ensure good level of oxygen supply?”

She would normally talk back or offer her own opinions when he would share his thoughts, but she remained silent. Although she had pretended like it wasn't so, she must be feeling embarrassed on being covered in 'the smell of nature' after working in the microbial laboratory.

“You're not hurt, right?”

She decided that she could no longer pretend to not hear him and shook her head.

“Well you weren't speaking, so. You're okay, right?”

Jungwu noticed that she looked resolute in remaining silent, so he decided to taunt her.

“Strange. I thought Sunbae was someone who was cheery and always ready to give warm words of advice to her Hoobae, but now that I see...”

“Now that you see what? What do you want to say?”

He heard an automatic response shoot out from under the straw hat.

“I’m usually suuuper calm and silent type you know? I’m always quiet during tea time, I am.”

“I see. I never realized that you were such a quiet and reserved person like this until now.”

Boyoung pushed back her hat in anger and gave an intense glare at Jungwu because of his playful taunt. Jungwu watched the production of the comet slow down and disappear as he said,

“It doesn’t smell that bad. It’s really similar to [Cheonggukjang...](#)”

Boyoung hit the table to prevent Jungwu from finishing his sentence. Jungwu couldn’t help but let out a snort of laughter.

“Don’t laugh. I have to go back in later, it was just that we weren’t done sterilizing. And let’s just call it a day for today.”

“Anyone listening in might misunderstand that we meet every day.”

“Just go already! Stop making fun of me and embarrassing me.”

“I thought I heard someone call herself calm and silent, did I imagine it?”

Boyoung’s cheeks puffed up in response to her nearly uncontainable wrath. Jungwu got up thinking that she might really explode if he were to continue.

“I’m heading out now. It’s almost time for Proposal Assessment.”

Jungwu moved away from the table. Boyoung who let out a short sigh of relief said in the passing.

“I heard that the Head Researcher is coming. He’s as unpredictable as Professor Chun so you should be careful.”

This was rather an ominous advice.

“Jungwu ssi, you really don’t want coffee? Huh? What’s that smell?”

Gitae and Sunghwan was approaching him so Jungwu quickly ran up to them.

“Did I ever explain the work process of Hana Ju the Team leader of Yujin Chemicals?”

“You have not, no.”

Jungwu lured the two of them to sit as far away from Boyoung as possible and spent the rest of the break there.

—

Once it was 1:55 PM, the inside of the Conference room began to fill with people.

“I see that Team Leader Park of Fundamental Elements Lab is here. I’ve heard that he doesn’t tolerate mistakes.”

“Electronics Center is obviously Team Leader Donggil. I predicted that.”

The Temps who were giving their own assessments of the representatives who arrived on behalf of the various Laboratories became speechless as they stared at the woman who walked through the doors.

“Who is she? I’ve never seen her before.”

“Me too. Was there such a beautiful woman like her at the research center?”

Jungwu who was browsing on his cellphone looked up out of reflex when he heard the temp’s conversations. And he saw a woman he was very well acquainted with.

‘Doctor Moon?’

She sat down in the seat reserved for the representative of the Pharmaceutical Center and gazed coldly and rather self indulgently at Jungwu. Her gaze seemed to ask him this question: Are you prepared to shut everyone up with your skill.

‘Mmm.’

Jungwu felt like the tension he had loosened up after meeting Boyoung in the breakroom was beginning to wind back up again.

“The Chief is on his way.”

When Manager Younghak who was in charge of the meeting gave the announcement, every researcher stood up from their seat. The door then opened up and executive researchers came filing into the room behind a man half of whose hair was white and who exuded a noble air about him.

Chief, Head of the Laboratory, Head Researcher. He was the central figure around whom KG Chemicals’ Laboratories operated.

The rest of the room seemed to freeze in place until every last one of these men took their seats, further intimidating the presenters.

‘Wow, so much pressure.’

Jungwu trembled as well. Once everyone took their seat, Manager Jun spoke from the podium.

“We will begin with a statement from the Chief.”

Every head in the conference room turned to the man with half white hair. Head Researcher Songu pressed the button on the mic and began to speak.

“I would like to first express my apologies. I have no excuses for why I did not take time to meet the people who are the future of KG Chemicals until now. I know that my sudden participation may feel more intimidating. I hope you can be understanding that I only wished to meet everyone even a little bit sooner as the Chief.”

The man then gave a short bow towards the direction the Temps were gathered. Jungwu was beyond surprised that the Head Researcher had spoken to them like a kind-hearted old man. It was a warm demeanor that contrasted very heavily with the stoic atmosphere of the rest of the heads.

“Our researchers are ‘Specialists’ in Chemistry. They are talented people who are an expert in one subject and are better than anybody else. My hope is that everyone will continue to work their very best as a ‘Specialist’ for the benefit of KG Chemicals.”

Aside from the Chief’s rather accented korean-esque pronunciation of ‘Specialist’, it was a completely flawlessly smooth greeting.

“First presenter, Pilho Kim, please come forward.”

The trembling Pilho took to the podium with a terrified expression. The lights over the seats dimmed down and the PT material was put on the screen.

“Hello. What I’ve prepared is the Heat Insulation coating for glass...”

The presentation continued for about five minutes. In spite of hearing all of it, Jungwu felt that the presentation was not all that different from the practice and the material still lacked impact.

“Did you say your name was Pilho?”

The first person to speak up for the question and answer session was not the Human Resource Manager who was in charge of the meeting but the Head of Fundamental Elements Center, Taesun Jang. Pilho swallowed loudly because the senior personal he wanted to impress most was first.

“You graduated from Postech(Pohang University of Science and Technology).”

“Yes, sir.”

“You spent a long time in graduate school. Looking at this, you

have quite an extensive experience participating in small individual projects.”

“I was able to finish my masterate with the research grant from KG Chemicals. I was studying in school with the mindset that I was already a part of this company.”

“You had so little confidence in your presentation, but I like the way you think.”

“I only have the deepest apologies about...”

“No, no. I don’t think that it is necessarily a requirement for a researcher to be able to speak well. What’s important is the content.”

Pilho seemed to brighten up when the Head seemed to say something positive.

“But, you know. Insulation, heat shield, and UV protection coating research has reached a sort of a dead end. The market is already saturated.”

“But...”

“I’m not trying to argue. I’m just letting you know about the topic you picked. There’s nothing left to add, subtract, or ask about it.”

His expression darkened again. Taesun looked to the side at the other heads and added,

“I don’t know about the other centers, but what we demand of our Researchers at the Fundamental Elements lab is good fundamental knowledge and experience. Your knowledge is about average, and your experience is superior to your peers. With this kind of results, I want you to join our center.”

This time the declaration filled Pilho’s expression with confusion.

‘Up and down, that researcher looks like he’s in for a ride.’

Jungwu was trembling just watching, he couldn’t imagine how terrified the man in question must be feeling right now.

The Head of the Electronics Center opened his mic.

“Hey, Professor Jang. How can you just tell him straight out that you liked him? Are the rest of the judging panel irrelevant?”

“The final approval is done by me anyway, what’s the problem with me telling them ahead of time?”

“That’s only if they go to the Fundamental Elements lab. You shouldn’t use the Proposal Assessment to interfere like this.”

“But the presentation material was for our lab.”

“My goodness, how stubborn. Chief, what are your thoughts?”

Songu gave a bright smile at Iljung’s question and answered,

“If the process is simplified then the effectiveness should rise as well. I think this spot is a great opportunity. And I trust the judgement of the professors here.”

Head of Component Sciences Center Jongsun also opened his Mic at the Chief’s lenient answer.

“If that’s how we will do this, I would also like to have him. All of his graduate research projects were on components. We are in desperate need of an experienced Researcher.”

When the Center Heads began to speak as if they were arguing amongst themselves, Pilho who was still standing at the podiums looked like he was about to cry, likely thinking ‘this is not what I was hoping to happen.’

“Are we picking the new recruits on first come first serve basis? Then I’ll reserve him first.”

“What do you mean first come first serve? How ungraceful. Let’s first hear all the presentations before we decide.”

The Center Heads began to speak one after another, murmuring here and there. But even though they were speaking, the Head of the Human Resource department who was supposed to be in charge of the presentation was unable to utter a single word.

‘Just what’s going on?’

Jungwu tried to think about the significance of what Songu had said and then paused. He had seen this kind of atmosphere and this kind of presentation event before. It was like a TV Audition program, where an individual rises to the stage to show his talents and the judges on the panel give their sharp feedback. Pilho did something similar to that, and some of the Center Heads saw potential in him and expressed their interest in him.

‘The Highest ranking members of the Research center are making real-time judgements. And if they like what they see, they immediately decide where the person will be going on the spot.’

If there are presenters that can attract the attention of the Heads, there must also be presenters who are the reverse. And if one were to analyze what the Head of the Fundamental Elements Center had said, then the ability to speak well and give a clean presentation was not the end all be all.

Their first assignment in the lab depended entirely upon the heads. And therefore, the format of this presentation unintentionally became like a survival show. The Temps next to Jungwu arrived to the same conclusion and their expressions

withered away.

The H sound is the last in the korean writing system.

Fermented soybean soup. Fermented is a fancy word for intentionally rotting. Here he is indicating that she smells like rotting soybeans.

Chapter 29 – Generalist (3)

Monday Morning.

KG Central Research Laboratory Conference room was busy, with various Heads of Centers arguing over the next year's budget.

"Please check this year's Intellectual Property Rights. The Electronics Center has a great deal more than any other center. From Lithium Ion Patent to Reinforced Nano Membrane (Alternative Name that comes up: Nano-enabled Filtration Membrane)"

"Does profitability not matter? Profit margins on Displays are vastly superior to Batteries."

"That's because your center focused more on sales than research."

"What did you say?"

The Head of Fundamentals Elements Center also jumped into the fray when the Heads of Electronics Center and Information Electronics Center began to argue.

"If you take into consideration the number of 1st tier projects in progress, the Fundamental Elements Lab has the most. Of course, we need the most funding as a result as well."

"Don't count the collaboration researches. We the Pharmaceutical Center have over ten we do solo."

Once the Pharmaceutical Center stepped in, the debates began to heat up. Senior Researcher Yoonseok let out a deep sigh, looking at the Heads of the Centers as if they were pathetic from his seat on one end of the conference table.

Project Subsidy fund.

It was not a fund that was as carefully managed as the Regular budget. All it did, in reality, was help increase the once a month

company outing to about once a week. But as Heads of the various Research Centers, it performed the important role of increasing the credit limit they could use to appear gracious and dignified before their researchers at the company's expense. So none of the Heads were willing to back down one bit.

At the place where all of their gazes were focused sat a wrinkled man with half white half black hair. He had a tranquil expression and was enjoying his coffee leisurely as if the chaos unfolding in the conference room was entirely unrelated to him.

“Chief, sir, the Heads of Centers are asking for your input.”

He turned his eyes towards the Heads.

“I trust everyone's decision. Please continue the discussions,” he said before returning to the serene world of his own. The room which had briefly fallen silent for him began a second round of arguments.

“Our Electronics center conserved our materials to be able to afford a [Membership Training](#) trip.”

“The Pharmaceuticals has a large number of employees recruited from other companies so if they aren't given a good treatment...”

Head Researcher Yoonseok Shin's gaze remained on Songu.

The Chief remained calm and was enjoying the yelling and bickering of the Heads of Centers as if it was background music. Yoonseok couldn't help but smile bitterly at the Chief's hobby of inciting the incredibly talented and gifted Heads of the Centers to fight among themselves. Even though he himself was known as the ‘[Tiger](#)’ of the Central Research Laboratory, but he was nothing in comparison to Chief Songu who was like the [Banded Red Snake](#).

Songu who was still wearing glasses as thick as magnifying glasses put down his coffee mug and picked up the documents that were placed before him. The papers he was reading were the assessments on the six temporary researchers from the Senior

Researchers.

Yoonseok directly asked, “Is there anyone who interests you in particular?”

“I don’t know. They are people who made it above hundreds of competitors so they should do very well. Like those Heads of Centers.”

“Fight well?”

“Haha.”

Songu then asked without taking his eyes off of the documents.

“What about you, Professor Shin? You’ve met the new recruits during the End of the Week meeting a few times.”

“He’s not a temp, but there was a special case intern that was brought in at the recommendation of Professor Chun who is currently on leave. His name is Jungwu Han.”

“Professor Chun did?”

Songu pressed the button on the table to instruct the Secretary to bring all documents available on the intern Jungwu that was on file.

“If he attracted the attention of Professor Chun then is he someone we should look forward to?”

“We haven’t made a decision yet.”

Yoonseok thought back about Professor Seunguk.

Central Research station’s problem Professor.

He was an eccentric researcher of an immense but unreplicable ability, who was of a rather difficult character. When the Professor suddenly announced he wanted to take a break for a year, the Center Heads who were antagonistic against him went as far as to celebrate the news.

Songu pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose before saying,

“Now that I think of it, didn’t Professor Shin do his schooling with Professor Chun?”

“We weren’t close.”

“Was anyone ever close with Professor Chun?”

Yoonseok could only grin at Songu’s question.

Click

“Chief, sir. I’ve brought it.”

The Secretary cracked open the door slightly and handed Songu the documents that had been requested.

“Let’s take a look now.”

Songu tilted his head when he saw the Resume.

“What an extremely unconventional personnel. His Major appears to have nothing to do with our line of work.”

“Whatever the reason, it was the one and only recommendation of a Chief Researcher,” said Yoonseok.

Songu’s eyes began to glow when he saw the other records.

“His name appears to be on the Team 4’s Project roster.”

“He was able to point out and revise the flaw in Professor Sangshik’s end product and managed to revive the project.”

“Oh ho.”

Songu who saw the next document made a rather strange expression.

“This looks like this report was made just now by the Finance Team. Yujin Chemicals deposited Project Grant to us. I suppose this Intern gave consultation?”

“He met Jaegil Yoon last week during the City Hall meeting and gave assistance with the Han River Railway incident.”

“He gave consultation to the country’s best Transportation

Infrastructure Maintenance company?”

“Team Leader Donggil and I heard the news in the middle of a meeting so I don’t know the details.”

Songu who found out consecutive shocking news about the intern’s activities began to read more carefully about Jungwu’s reports.

“Jaegil personally sent the Grant in Intern’s name. What do you suppose this means?”

“The fact that he took the time to deposit it in his name, well there’s only one explanation isn’t there? This is a bait to scout him. That, if we were to use this funds for use by the rest of the Lab, then he would immediately inform the intern to insist that we are treating him unfairly.”

“He must have really liked him. To go as far as to use such an underhanded method.”

Songu turned the page, and couldn’t help but laugh.

“The Sales team sent him Commissions. To the intern.”

“Excuse me?”

This was something even Yoonseok didn’t know yet, so he read the document Songu held out together.

“Super Snow Mix? He was able to sell this failed product?”

“Failed?” Songu tilted his head.

“It was a chemical composite that we weren’t able to find buyers for due to the high cost of production in comparison to its performance.”

“Looks like a Major Shopping Mall purchased quite a large volume of it.”

Songu’s expression showed curiosity towards this intern who was able to demonstrate an unbelievable variety of

accomplishment in just one week.

“Chief, sir.”

Yoonseok who read the report then made a completely nonsensical suggestion.

“What do you think about just allowing Yujin Chemical’s Project Grant to be used only by the Intern himself?”

“To someone who’s not even a Team Leader tier, but to an intern? This too is most unconventional.”

“Well at the very least we have sufficient proof that he’s gifted enough to be sought by Jaegil Yoon. And if he is anything like Professor Chun, then receiving Project Grants like this, or making commissions... this won’t be the end of it.”

After watching Songu think deeply for a moment, Yoonseok added another idea that just occurred to him.

“This Intern is going to participate in the Proposal Assessment this afternoon. Would you like to attend?”

Normally, only the representatives of the Centers, as well as the Training Managers, attended such events. Songu took a look around at the Heads of Centers who were still bickering energetically among themselves as he said, “I suspect it will get as rowdy as now.”

“I will inform the Training manager now.”

[Scene Change]

Jungwu sat on the chair next to the Vending Machine staring at the laptop screen.

He had the PT file for the Proposal Assessment open and was thinking about what he should say during the presentation for the past hour.

‘It’s really nerve wrecking now that the time has come.’

The purpose of the Project Assessment that his Sunbaes had suggested during last Friday's Company Outing was a little different than what he had initially predicted. Instead of making a real project proposal to be selected for new research, it was more used to appeal the good sides of the presenter, like saying 'here are my strengths so please come and pick me'.

There was the Fundamental Elements Lab, Electronics Development, Information Electronics, Component Sciences, and Pharmaceuticals. And finally, the Central Research Center which combined all of these Centers.

In terms of the military, it was like the Soldiers being lined up before the commanding officers.

The Temporary Researchers prepared for the specialization they hoped to enter with their projects. And each of them checked each other's work to try and maximize their scores from the representatives of the centers of their choices. For three whole months.

'I guess technically I had 3 days?'

His condition wasn't the best due to not having a good rest last night.

"If I keep thinking negatively, things will go poorly for sure. Let's believe in myself... or Professor Chun," he mumbled to himself before returning his attention to the PT file.

"You're working hard."

Jungwu knew exactly who it was without having to turn thanks to the bright and energetic voice.

'Boyoung Sunbae.'

She walked up to Jungwu while yawning.

"I came by to take a quick coffee break, would Jungwu ssi like a cup too?"

“For free? Without any strings attached?”

“Of course. [Were you tricked all your life?](#)”

Because he kept getting tricked, he thought of trying to guess her intentions and closely inspected Boyoung. But she who stood before the Vending Machine looked especially plain.

“Don’t stare at me like that. I have to go back to the Microbe Lab shortly so my self-confidence is pretty low.”

“Self-confidence?”

“Oh, Sunbae won’t let me put on cream on my face worried that the particles of makeup might alter the readings.”

“You don’t seem all that different from usual though?”

Boyoung smiled widely when she heard this.

“I’m so~oo pretty even without makeup, is that what you mean?”

“It means you’re the same with or without makeup.”

She gave him a withering look when he cleared up the misunderstanding. Shortly after, Boyoung handed him a paper cup containing coffee before sitting next to him. Jungwu took a sip before asking, “What kind of research is going on in the Microbe Lab?”

“It’s a long-term project for Lab 1. It’s a Rural Revival Project that’s done jointly with the Agricultural Environments Researchers. It’s not particularly difficult but it’s a project given by the country so there’s a lot of things we have to keep in mind.”

“I see that it’s a noble work for the purpose of improving agriculture.”

“What kind of nobility is there in working with fertilizers? I can’t wait until I’m not the one that has to be doing that work. The smell of the Compost is just...”

Boyoung grimaced and said, “Bleagh” when Jungwu realized

something and asked Boyoung just in case.

“Do you have to do it because you’re the newest to the Lab 1?”

Boyoung nodded with a sad expression. “I need a Hoobae to come quickly so I can push off this work.”

A Research on putrid deposit forced onto the newest member of the lab. It was a piece of info that made him hope he would get assigned to anywhere other than Lab 1.

“Jungwu ssi, what’s your topic for the presentation? I thought it was on Synthetic Resin last time I took a glance at it.”

“It’s on Stronger-than-Steel Plastic.

“Eh? The one Professor Chun...”

“Yes. I want to inherit the project and develop it.”

Jungwu laughed when he saw Boyoung’s expression which clearly showed her desire to take his laptop and see the next page on the PT document.

He got Coffee out of it, and she hasn’t asked about the whereabouts of Professor Chun or other difficult questions the last few days. So he couldn’t help but feel that he should just let her see the material.

‘She didn’t sit here on purpose for that reason, right?’

But she was not a Sunbae with such a conniving personality. It was more likely that she would unabashedly demand to see it.

“Sunbae nim.”

“Yes?”

“Could you please take a look at it to make sure I did a good job?”

Boyoung’s face brightened up and she nodded enthusiastically. While checking the PT file using the directional keys on the laptop, she couldn’t help but exclaim ‘wow’ from time to time.

“It looks like you already finalized the concept for solidifying

over 90% of plastic then?”

“I used the early mechanism of Polymer Crystallization as a point of reference.”

“But this could be applied to over half of the products that need strong but light material; Car dashboards, to food containers. There’s no reason why this project wouldn’t be picked.”

As it was a topic he had picked specifically because it would immediately benefit and bring profit to KG Chemicals, Boyoung’s reaction could be considered normal.

‘As long as it passes the verification...’

But whatever may happen, Boyoung’s elated response helped alleviate some of his fears.

“I want to see more of this, how about a lunch together?”

“Um... That’s after you go into the Microbe lab, right?”

“Yes that’s true, why?”

When Jungwu gave her a ‘are you really asking why’ face, Boyoung looked backed feigning ignorance.

“I’ll eat alone. I’ll be busy.”

“That Compost, you know, smells pretty savory after a while. And also, are you downplaying the noble sacrifice of one researcher who is selflessly working for the benefit of Farming towns? You looked like you were about to cry earlier. I’ll just send this file to your email.”

“Sure, why not.”

Boyoung put the Milk Coffee cup against her mouth and drained it until the last drop before she jumped to her feet.

“You promised!” she declared with a sunny smile before walking towards the offices.

Jungwu shook his head, thinking maybe he should have accepted

the invitation to have lunch together. He strangely felt like he was being dragged along to her pace since yesterday.

‘Let’s focus, concentrate.’

But Jungwu’s focus did not last even 1 minute before being interrupted. It was due to the screams coming from the direction of the Temporary Researcher’s offices.

“What the hell, the Chief is coming? And because of that, all the Heads of Centers as well?”

“But it’s not like these presentations are meant to have any impact on the good of the future of the Research Centers!”

The fact that the entire upper echelon of the Research Center will be showing up and be present to the event where newbie researchers of less than six months of employment are to give presentation of their pitiful greenhorn ideas was also shocking to Jungwu.

‘What? Suddenly why?’

(Membership training is actually a Korean cultural excuse for companies to take new employees on a group trip to have fun as a form of welcoming party.)

Scary, strict. Tiger has a respectable and fearsome image.

Koreans abhor the snake, and snakes are typically seen as sneaky and treacherous (dangerous cold-blooded etc etc etc). But Banded Red Snake is also known as king of snakes, not because it’s particularly large or venomous (it’s actually mostly non-venomous species) but because it is often found eating other snakes and reptiles, even scorpions. Calling someone banded red snake implies not only they are like the negative qualities of the terrible snake, they are the king of snakes.

this means that ‘were you tricked so often that you’re so cautious/distrusting?’

Chapter 30 – Generalist (4)

Yoonseok who was sitting alongside the Senior Researchers massaged his temples as he watched the second presenter stuttering to answer. Gitae, senior temporary researcher and Kaist alumni. The recruit Yoonseok had come to know through the End of the week Conference was nowhere near as timid as he was being now.

Yoonseok also enjoyed putting on the pressure. He believed that a proper amount of whipping helped improve work efficiency. But the style of assessment that the Center Heads were giving now far surpassed the level that can be called intimidation and reached the point of violence. None of them realized this because they were looking down from a high position. And because Songu was watching the Heads of Centers continue with their shameful conduct like he was watching children play, Yoonseok could do nothing but let out sighs.

‘Was my suggestion a mistake?’

Yoonseok gazed over to the one who had moved the Chief today.

Jungwu Han. This twenty six years old young man took many noteworthy actions from the moment he joined. As if he was Seungguk Chun from his student days at Heidelberg.

‘I don’t know to what extent he will meet our expectations.’

If this young man is able to show something that far surpasses his expectation, then the man would bring about new winds of change from within KG Chemicals.

“Hello, I’m G...Gyumin Suh. The presentation I have prepared is for improving the yield of Substrate Glass mass produced for KG Chemical’s primary display TFT-LCD...”

“Core business line. A clever plan. I like it.”

“The topic of factory yield improvement research is already

underway by our Electronics Center as one of the long term projects. This presentation is far lacking in comparison.”

Each time the Head of Centers butted heads between one who liked the project and another who pointed out flaws, the expressions of the recruits grew increasingly dyed with helplessness. The same happened to the one after, and even the next presenter after that; the process of three months worth of preparations and hard work being thoroughly dismantled along with their mental state repeated itself.

“Adhesive tape? Researcher Gaehyung Yi. Did you really think that a research project can be carried out with just one reaction formula of Mussel Adhesive Material’s interaction with the metallic components found on surfaces of rocks?”

“If the tape is capable of remaining adhesive under water, then it has applications in Medicine or Electronics Technology...”

“That’s unrealistically optimistic. It’s good to dream big, but your dreams must remain a realistic one for KG Chemicals.”

The Head of Fundamental Elements Center’s rather blunt criticism of the Recruit made the rest of the Temp Researchers present sigh all together in solidarity.

An hour passed, and finally, even Sunghwan Jo finished his presentation and had taken his seat.

“Seventh Presenter please come forward.”

Jungwu rose from his seat at Manager Jun’s voice. He felt the blank stares of the knocked down and battered Temp Researchers gather on his back as he walked up to the podium.

‘It somehow feels like I’m walking toward my doom.’

Sunghwan who had gone earlier and taken a long barrage from the Head of Pharmaceutical Center gave a thumbs up and an energyless smile when their eyes met.

‘I thought things might turn out this way.’

The points in the presentation that Jungwu felt were bland or lacking during the practice earlier were exactly what the Center Heads had pointed out as well.

From the very moment, the topic they had prepared began to be thoroughly dismantled, confidence was erased from the faces of the Temp Researchers. But Jungwu who had seen the passion and the effort that had gone into the preparations felt a bit sorry for them.

“Sigh, who am I to worry about others. I need to worry about myself first.’

Manager Jun began to speak while Jungwu was adjusting the height of the mic.

“Colleague Jungwu Han is an intern who just joined us last week. We have decided to include him in the Project Proposal assessment to see what kind of vision and worth he has as a researcher. Please take this into consideration in his assessment.”

And finally, the silence began. Jungwu felt naked and exposed as the gathering of all the highest ranking researchers of KG Chemicals collectively stared down upon him together.

The trembling and anxiety akin to the first ever job interview.

Here, TOEIC score, GPA, oratory prowess to make everyone laugh and crack jokes were all useless. He had no choice but to show something to prove his worth as a chemist.

“My name is Jungwu Han and I have prepared a presentation on the research of ‘Stronger than Steel Plastics’.”

The PT file he had prepared appeared on the screen and then Jungwu began to speak without interruption or hesitation as he gave his presentation. He had spent the entire morning reviewing the chemical knowledge in his head. Even if he didn’t put in any effort to memorize the information, he already understood the

principles through and through and the words came smoothly to him. Few of the Heads looked curious as his flawless presentation carried on. It was a very positive sign.

“...when the method is applied to liquid mix, it causes the string-shaped molecules to become pulled and organized. And if they are solidified in that state, it becomes a product with a high percentage of crystalline structure.”

“Wait.”

Jungwu was about to continue with his presentation when he was stopped by the Head of Fundamental Elements Center.

“Did you prepare this PT?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Unless I’ve read this CV wrong, aren’t you a Business Major?”

“Yes, sir that is correct.”

“That’s correct? If that’s correct then how...”

“Hey, Professor Jang. Don’t interrupt the presentation. He was in the middle of presenting a riveting method of successfully creating a 90% crystalline structured material.” The Head of Material Sciences Center Jongsun No who had been bickering with Taesun Jang all throughout the presentations motioned for Jungwu to continue.

“This liquid has adhesive properties. And if this is flattened using high speed...”

“...a new material that can compete with Metals and Ceramics. This is the 1st objective of this research topic.”

When the presentation that was incomparable to the material presented by the other six recruits was over, the Center Heads who had been derailing and shutting down the research topics were momentarily at loss for words.

“Who would like to comment first?”

Manager Jun smiled slightly as he asked. As the one in charge of training, he did not like to watch the new hires be crushed. And Jungwu did not seem like he was about to be.

“Time is passing. Are there no one who wishes to ask anything?”

Taesun Jang turned on the mic.

“Intern Jungwu Han. About the crystallization process. Using no additives and relying only on the process itself... how did you come up with this?”

Jungwu looked at the string-shaped molecular structure that had appeared over the PT on the screen as he carefully answered.

“I based the idea on molecules that already exist in nature. Protein or DNA Polymers are able to perform their function thanks to the ability of replicating and constructing itself.”

“That perspective is quite...different. Is it because you’re a non-professional? This research has low cost, low energy and material consumption, low carbon emission, and can even bring long term benefits to society as a whole. Excellent work.”

“Eh... Society as a whole?”

Because Jungwu had not prepared this research with such a grandiose vision, he could not give a proper answer in response. Taesun continued,

“And me interrupting you in the middle of presentation was simply out of amazement. A young intern like you basically appeared out of nowhere. You said you joined just a week ago? Your future looks very bright.”

“Anyway this topic is also under the umbrella of Fundamental Elements Lab. Bravo. Congratulations and welcome to our Center.”

Taesun began with praises and ended with orders for personnel relocation. When this happened Jongsun No who had been doing nothing but exclaim at Jungwu quickly opened his mic to interject.

“Since it’s a 90% Crystallization method, I’ll give you 90 points. You don’t need to go through complicated paperwork and process and start immediately at the Material Sciences Lab and begin the project. You should aim for 100 points, don’t you think?”

“Professor No, you can’t just decide that without...”

“Wait. Come to the Electronics Development Center. We have a research slot vacant so we can supply funding immediately. It means that we can start the research project before we even do the inauguration.”

“Hey, Professor Huh! You just finished telling us that you lacked MT Funds and had to cut cost at consumables! Then reduce your Project Subsidy share!”

“Why are you bringing up the Project Subsidy funds now?”

The question and answer time once again devolved into a battleground for the Heads.

“Since there were three proposals in the presentation for just Fundamental Elements lab, please give us first pick.”

“Professor Jang, is this some sort of Horse race? Choose what and pick what? Let’s just follow the procedure.”

“Wait, how can you change your mind just because you have talent you want to grab? You agreed to simplify the procedure earlier!”

The good thing was that there didn’t appear to be a Head that had a poor opinion of him. Jungwu let out a sigh in relief as if a burden was lifted from him.

He raised a thumb towards Gitae and Sunghwan who had grown very close to him during the last break. And they too bowed their head toward Jungwu as a show of thanks.

‘It’s such a relief that the presentation is over’

It was when he was thinking it was all over and started being

happy that he gazed over and saw the first speaker Pilho Kim who was sitting on one end of the room looking forlorn. None of the Heads had given him much attention. And therefore, he was unable to leave a lasting impression.

‘Mmm...’

The expression on Pilho’s face was strangely familiar. Jungwu’s own expression had been like that back in spring when he was going around to interviews when he saw competitors being praised for giving good answers and feeling empty inside. Even Gitae and Sunghwan who had clapped for Jungwu showed signs of bitterness and regret at the corner of their lips.

‘So this is competition. This.’

Jungwu stood quietly because it didn’t look like the Center Heads were going to be done anytime soon with their conversations. No matter which Center he is sent to, he didn’t really mind so he had thought that as soon as things calmed down a bit, he would be able to hear next directions from the ones in charge.

“It was a very impressive presentation.”

But then, the Chief researcher Songu suddenly turned on his mic. His seemingly laid back but somehow heavy voice caused all the Heads to shut up in an instant.

A serene silence fell over the room.

“Intern Jungwu Han.”

“Yes, Chief sir.”

“There’s still plenty of time remaining for presentation, is there nothing you would like to add?”

“Add?”

He suddenly had a thought when he saw the expression on the Chief’s face that reminded him of a friendly neighborhood grandfather.

‘He’s someone difficult to deal with, huh.’

“Well...”

“It’s all fine so please speak freely.”

It was sanctioned by the Chief Researcher himself. Jungwu felt that he should do whatever he can that was within his power.

“This isn’t my topic, but there was something I wanted to add to Pilho Kim’s presentation.”

Jungwu turned to check on Pilho. Pilho nodded his head to show it was fine to continue. He must have also felt nervous because of the Chief.

“Is that so? Please go on.”

As soon as the Chief finished speaking, Manager Jun who had been hanging on to every word on the exchange quickly searched for and put on the PT material for the first presentation on the screen.

“Please go to the image on the 4th page, Manager.”

Jungwu’s gaze stopped on the image that showed the window glass and coating material. And as he thought, the chemical reaction formula popped up and enlarged itself, making it possible for Jungwu to understand what was going on in the microscopic world on an intuitive level.

“One of the Head has stated that insulation coating research is difficult to advance.”

Fundamental Elements Lab Head Taesun Jang turned on his mic in response.

“That is correct. There is no room in the market to enter.”

“What if we use material that has 3 times the average energy savings?” said Jungwu

“Is there still such a groundbreaking material yet to be found?”

“Ah, is 3 times something groundbreaking?”

Jungwu quickly checked the values listed in his documents and replied.

“If we apply ‘light control’ thin film coating that allows the glass to become transparent or mirror-like, then the effectiveness rises to 6 times. It reflects light during summer and allows the light to pass during winter so it maximizes the seasonal energy savings.”

“What?”

“It can be done by making the reaction responsible for reflecting the visible spectrum of light be reversible by using palladium and hydrogen gas reactions.

“Hmm? This will need some further study.”

“Professor Jang. What do you mean by further study? Don’t you understand? Intern Jungwu. Give us a more detailed explanation.” Professor Huh intervened.

Jungwu had no choice but to walk over toward the screen at the Head’s orders and pointed toward the area between the glass and the glass frame.

“This part. If the Thin Film alloy in charge of the management of light becomes hydrogenated then it becomes transparent, and if it becomes dehydrogenated due to oxygen, then it becomes a mirror. If Palladium is too expensive, then we can redirect the research toward Magnesium or a Nickel alloy.”

Taesun became mute. If this was right, then let alone not being at the end of the road for development and research, the success of the project would give it a good chance of becoming the number 1 research project in the entire research center.

Taesun grimaced due to being stuck between being unable to go back and withdraw or modify his statement from earlier in fear of losing face before the other Heads and not being able to openly admit he was wrong. Professor Iljung Huh, the Head of the

Electronics Center who had been bickering the most with him throughout the presentations began to laugh loudly.

“Hey Professor Jang, it looks like the project you were putting down just got resuscitated by that intern.”

“I get it so please shut up.”

“It was such a good idea to participate today. I never thought I’d see such a precious sight.”

Taesun Jang, who became enraged glared at Jungwu as he asked, “Any other thoughts? What about the PT Professor Huh had attacked?”

“Excuse me?”

Jungwu tilted his head until he recalled the information on Solar Power Panel that Gitae had presented.

“It’s not that there is none but...”

“Then go ahead and say it. That’s the whole point of question and answer session.”

This time Manager Jun put Gitae’s file on the screen. Meanwhile, the Chief who had been smiling throughout the bickering of the heads had already withdrawn from the discussion.

Jungwu watched the screen as he carefully expressed his opinion.

“Someone said earlier that research on improving the efficiency of a semiconductor is too broad to be a research project and therefore it was pointless...”

“You are correct. Professor Huh had said that.”

Iljung was forced to swallow back a groan when Taesun immediately pointed that out.

Jungwu watched the chemical hologram images of ring-shaped compound melting down to liquid form and floating over the surface of the semiconductor as he answered.

“What do you think about using ‘silicon ink’ that turns to liquid when heated rather than standard silicon for the research development direction? So that there is no waste silicon and is more efficient.”

“What do you mean by liquid?”

“Expose Cyclopentasilane under x ray to change it to Polyhydrosilane, then melt that with an organic solvent. If we drop this liquid on the glass surface and then give it high speed rotation, then it will spread across the surface evenly. If heated.”

Manager Jun typed extremely quickly so that as soon as Jungwu suggested a new perspective on the research projects, it was added into the PT as an addendum.

The rest of the researchers naturally turned to look at Jungwu after he made two Heads of Centers fall quiet. And up until now, the other Heads with the exception of Fundamental Elements Lab and Electronics Development Lab had been laughing away.

And then, Iljung decided that he didn’t want to be the only one singled out so he pointed toward the Information Electronics Materials Lab’s Head, Sungbo Kim.

“What do you think about displays? Professor Kim had a lot to criticize on that one.”

“Wel...”

Jungwu scratched his chin. He didn’t know if this was okay but like how chemical reactions could not be stopped midway, he felt like the situation was past the point where it could be stopped.

Manager Jung opened up the 3rd PT that Gyumin had prepared like it was the most natural thing in the world and Sungbo Kim let out a groan mixed with nervousness.

“Professor Sungbo Kim.”

“You can’t possibly...”

“No, it’s not a major thought or anything. Production efficiency improvements of the Display category are under the umbrella of microelectronics sciences, right? I have a lot of interest in things happening on a tiny scale. Please consider this just my opinion on the matter as you listen. Try to reimagine the program not on a microscopic scale but on a nanoscopic scale...”

Sungbo grew quieter and quieter as Jungwu continued to bring up more and more opinions up.

There seemed to be some sort of a domino effect. When Manager Jun put up the PT for the 4th presentation that the Yungshik Oo had given on the topic of batteries, the Head of Center that had criticized it the most couldn’t help but gasp in surprise.

“The thing about experiments involving Hydrogen tanks, it has quite a high risk.”

“What about storing it inside a storage unit with Carbon Nano Tubes? Graphite Nanofiber might also be worth researching. The microscopic holes that Hydrogen atoms can fit into seemed to synergize well to make a fairly sturdy structure...”

“Uh, then it won’t be that dangerous. My comment earlier did not take into consideration the super nanoscopic storage solutions.”

Head of Material Science Center Jongsun No who had been very enthusiastic about Jungwu from the very start spoke softly to Manager Jun when the man exhibited a terrifying initiative and moved onto the 5th presentation material.

“Human Resources Manager Yunghak Jun. Jungwu did not ask for you to put this one up.”

“Is that so? Jungwu ssi, do you have any comments about this one?” asked Manager Jun.

The attention of the other researchers who were observing became refocused at this question.

“I kind of do,” said Jungwu.

“Must you do things this way? It’s me, Head of Material Sciences Center. We ought to research a 100 point project together.” Jongsun glared at Manager Jun as he asked, “And aren’t we out of presentation time anyway?”

“We have 3 minutes and 23 seconds remaining.” Manager Jun answered as if he was expecting the question.

“Herm.”

The temp researchers who were sitting right by the podium from some time ago sported smiles, too busy watching the expression of the Heads as they struggled because of Jungwu.

“About Adhesive Tape...”

“I don’t remember.”

There was a round of laughter when Jongsun immediately denied any knowledge.

“Not just adhesive, but you know that wrinkle that can be seen on the underside of a Lizard’s feet? It’s called Setae right? If this fine unevenness can be utilized to make an adhesion reaction, then would it be enough to make it a research project?”

“It isn’t enough with just those two.”

“Of course, I also agree that two is not enough. So I was thinking, what about also making it adhesive in visible light and fall off when exposed to UV ray by using Photocurable Resin?”

Jungwu checked the structure of the gigantic atomic constellation that appeared before his eyes before continuing. “Azobenzene becomes straight in Visible light, and bends under UV, you know.”

“Three is...”

“Is it still not enough? I guess I still have much to learn.” Jungwu was completely unhesitant in each and every one of his replies.

Jongsun was particularly impressed by this point and exclaimed.

“No, it’s not bad. It is plenty worth researching. I give 85 points after all these changes.”

When even Jongsun acknowledged it, the Senior researchers who outranked even the Heads began to give applause.

“Intern Jungwu Han.”

Taesun who was the first to be embarrassed by Jungwu’s comments had been quiet for the most part, but after all other Heads were similarly humiliated, he had begun to grin widely and opened his mic.

“Let me just ask one question. All of these changes and comments to the research proposals. Did you come up with all of these ideas?”

“Strictly speaking, I wasn’t alone.”

“Then?”

“I learned from the comments of the Heads of the centers. I am very thankful for the lesson.”

“You pushed Professor Huh to the corner and now you’re being humble? You’re exactly what Fundamental Elements Lab needs. Since our line of research usually begins with questioning existing materials.”

All the other Heads were shocked at the face of Taesun’s brazen attempt to steal away Jungwu’s favor with a compliment.

Chapter 31 – Generalist (5)

While interns and the Heads of Centers were busy using the five presentations as an excuse to get unruly, there was actually one person who had been sitting in anticipation.

Head of Pharmaceutical Center Donghwi Yoon. He was watching Manager Jun who was doing something on the laptop. The scheduled time for presentations was almost over. Meanwhile, he wanted to see if that extremely talented intern would be able to display incredible mastery over even the subject of Biology.

‘Like Researcher Chaeun Moon.’

Donghwi looked over to Chaeun Moon who suddenly showed up to ask if she could participate in the Researcher Evaluation happening today. She was one of the core members who influenced the direction of research in the development of new medicine. With Diagnostics Medicine as a base, she was a person who demonstrated a high degree of productivity. Except for the feeling of uselessness he occasionally felt when comparing himself to her fearsome worth ethic, she was quite literally the treasure of the Research Station.

‘So just do it already! I want to see what happens even if we get laughed at.’

And while he was watching Manager Jun expectantly, the sixth presentation appeared on the screen.

[Research on Protein Polymers as Allergy Suppressant]

“Hmm? Another one?”

The Heads of Centers who had been in the middle of bickering looked to the screen with surprise. Jungwu lowered his head towards Manager Jun who was sitting below the podium and asked,

“How much time is there, Manager Jun?”

“About 1 minute. But please take as much time as you need.”

Jungwu took a deep breath and then turned his gaze to the PT material. After having looked at five mini universes, seeing the sixth made him feel dizzy.

And whenever any Chemistry related observation occurs, he ends up speaking nonstop as if his mouth was put on autopilot.

‘Whatever the case, this shape is kind of peculiar.’

What appeared before him was some large round object with a bumpy appearance giving off blue light. This object which was several hundred times larger than molecular stars was a type of cell.

“Professor Yoon.”

“Yes, go ahead.”

“You said that when it comes to Allergy Remedy research, symptom therapy focused on alleviation is one of the most important factors, so if results are inconclusive then the research will lose traction, right?”

“What great memory. Yes, that is correct.”

“What if we were able to use Genetic Analysis to produce Protein Polymers that individually act on Inhibitory T Cells?”

Sitting there, with such short time, coming up with new research ideas six times in a row, Donghwi’s eyes lit up as he watched Jungwu make a suggestion.

“So you suggest we design immunity tolerance around per basis model?”

“It’s similar.”

Jungwu watched the misshapen stars floating above the PT screen. While it was orbiting in a wiggly fashion, it was attracting and absorbing comets with its gravity.

“In order to directly eliminate allergy-causing microbes while also inhibiting immunity cells to prevent malfunction, we need to thoroughly analyze...”

When Donghwi had to pause for a moment to think about the quick proposal Jungwu had made following the sudden change of topic, the other Heads of Centers looked smug.

“Head of Center Donghwi nim.”

Suddenly, there was an interruption by a clear refreshing voice. The attention of all the Heads of Centers who were paying attention to Jungwu instantly gathered onto the left side seats of the Judges.

“May I exchange thoughts with intern Jungwu Han?”

“Oh, Doctor Moon. You are our Center’s representative, so please do as you like.”

Donghwi made a wide grin when an unexpected rescue came his way. Everyone’s eyes fell upon Doctor Moon.

A formal yet attractive outfit with just the right amount of flair; once the beautiful Researcher befitting an image of a [tea lady](#) began to speak, the attention of even the Head Researchers were focused on her face more than any other time.

“About cells that influence the immune system, there are more things to consider than simply tackling the issue from a purely chemical point of view. Are Microbes only harmful to the body?”

Her well enunciated announcer-like voice eased the steady information flowing from her lips into everyone’s head, which is why the question she threw out spread across the conference room in record time.

Jungwu hesitated because an answer to this question did not arise immediately.

“A human body needs a certain level of germs. A lack of exposure

leads to the stunted development of the immune system, which leads to an increase in the risk of functional impairments. For example, Atopic Dermatitis; the percentage of population afflicted were much lower when the environments were less sanitary.”

The question that was not in the realm of Chemistry but that of Medicine stimulated the attention of the Heads of Centers. Donghwi watched the treasure of his Center with pride as he waited to see whether or not the intern would be able to make a reply.

Jungwu watched the shower of comets fall all around the misshapen star. Each and every one of the comets were pathogens.

“Doctor Moon. What if we were to individually tackle each of the causes of Atopic Dermatitis? Heavy metals, chemical additives, environmental hormones, allergens.”

“You want to target the causes that react differently for everyone one by one?”

“Of course it will take effort and funding. But much of the proteins that form human genome is leftovers from viral infections from long ago. A portion of those do nothing, but some under the right circumstance could cause cancer.”

Once Jungwu began his reply, the attention refocused on him.

“With modern technology and techniques, I believe that using DNA analysis to predict actual response to pathogen would not be all that difficult.”

“The Genome concepts on the subject of recombination is not developed enough to utilize. Just like how it is impossible for a single individual to carry genetic material that reacts to all existing illnesses...”

Chemistry and Medicine clashed and combined as the two endlessly discussed between themselves. A minute was long past and even after 3 minutes elapsed the conversation was not yet

over.

Taesun Jang, the Head of Fundamental Materials Laboratory, who had been watching absentmindedly then opened his mic.

“Hold on hold on. Are you two on a date? Why are you two so excited to go back and forth?”

Jungwu snapped awake from a state where he was concentrating on the phantom images and speaking automatically. The misshapen star disappeared along with the brightening Conference Room lights.

“And you there, did you say you were Doctor Moon of the Pharmaceutical Center?”

“Yes. I am Senior Researcher Chaeun Moon.”

“Professor Yoon used Doctor Moon as an excuse to take a large portion of the grant money, and you seem to deserve it. It was very impressive. If you have nothing to do at Pharmaceutical Center, come to Fundamental Elements Lab.”

Taesun Jang then turned to Jungwu.

“We’ve seen all there is to see. Now, shall we talk about the issue of what Center that intern will be joining?”

All the heads of Center activated their mic in unison.

“Actually, the material Jungwu Han had presented is ideal for our Project leads to start. But that kind of ability to think and respond on his feet, this is perfect for Electronics development Center where there are lots of variables.”

Jongsun No took his turn after Iljung’s apparent closing statement.

“You have the talent to raise a project’s score from 0 to 85 percent. As a practitioner of Material Sciences, I was deeply impressed. Let us build our worth together, intern Jungwu Han.”

“The Information Electronics Lab has plenty of funding as well as

empty labs. We can begin a project straight away.”

“As you have seen with Doctor Moon, only a meeting between a talent and another talent can cause amplification like a chemical reaction. Pharmaceutical Lab that has the gathering of the best and the brightest minds of the whole Research Center is the most ideal choice.”

Taesun Jang who was listening to them all along finally said,

“Intern Jungwu Han. What do you think about what the Heads of Centers are saying? Blah Blah Blah. Oh my goodness so complicated. Just come to the Fundamental Elementals Lab. There’s no Head of Center as young and cool as me.”

“Hey, Professor Jang! Then just settle it with rock paper and scissors!”

They were becoming rowdy once more. After fighting in a battle that seemed like it could never end, THIS was the result they finally arrived at.

“Chief, sir. What do you think about all this?”

The gaze of everyone in the Conference room immediately headed towards Songu. Songu smiled brightly and quietly opened his mic before replying.

“First, I would like to thank all the Temporary Researchers for working hard and preparing the presentations. You have shown me today that it was not wrong to believe that all of you here are the future of KG Chemicals.”

Chief’s warm statement thanking and recognizing the now completely-forgotten Temporary Researchers was perfect in cooling the minds of all the Researchers present.

“I wish for KG Chemicals Research center to be more than just a comfortable place to work. I wish for it to be comfortable to work as well as a place you enjoy working. Sunbae Researchers say it like a motto right? Research isn’t done alone. I hope that even if you

feel unprepared, you will develop into an excellent personnel as you continue to research here.”

The 6 Temporary Researchers looked upon Songu following his rather relaxed but profound-sounding reply with looks of respect and awe.

“Chief, sir.”

Taesun opened his mic and asked carefully.

“So, what are your thoughts on assignment of personale...”

“Ah, that? I trust in the judgement of the Heads of Centers.”

“Again?”

Taesun Jang continued to speak, biting back the desire to groan out loud.

“I too trust my judgement very much. But other Heads of Centers don’t. Their stubbornness is so...”

“Hey, Professor Jang. Are you seriously insinuating your mule like stubbornness is nothing?”

“The two of you, please take this fight outside. Give us Jungwu and Gitae though.”

“Professor Hu, you’re trying to sneak off with even the Head Temporary Researcher?”

The chaos returned.

Behind the Heads of Center, Yoonseok who had been sitting among other Head Researchers couldn’t take it anymore and turned on his mic to shout very loudly.

“Order! Please have some decency, Heads of Centers!”

A deep voice echoed through the room. Silence hung in the conference room shortly after Yoonseok opened his mouth.

None of the Heads of Centers dared opened their mouth to make a noise when the Head Researcher second only to the Chief himself

yelled at them.

‘Oh, it’s him.’

Jungwu automatically felt nervous when the expressionless Yoonseok finally took the spotlight.

“May I speak my mind, Chief sir?”

“Of course. There is not one researcher present who is not permitted to speak in here.”

Songu gave Yoonseok a gaze that seemed to say ‘I trust in the judgement of the Head Researcher’. Yoonseok took a brief but deep breath before starting.

“For the assessment of the Temporary Researchers, Mr Human Resources Manager please follow standard operating procedures.”

Manager Jun nodded.

“And that problem Intern.”

Jungwu couldn’t help but gulp when Yoonseok looked his way.

“That man who was able to put on such an impressive display of talent, he gave us absolute confidence that he trusts his sunbaes and wishes to research together.”

Yoonseok swept his gaze toward the Heads of Centers. “And impressed all presentation long, the Heads of Centers have diligently carried out a comprehensive series of questions and answers to better understand the Intern’s abilities.”

In such short statement, Yoonseok even provided a way for the Heads of Centers to save their faces, causing them all to nod in agreement.

“Earlier, Chief had declared that we are a gathering of Specialists. I admit this is true. But as time passes, when someone reaches the position of appointed officer, then moves up to Head Researcher, and finally an executive...”

Yoonseok turned to look at Jungwu once again.

“...Then that person ends up as a Generalist. Armed with boundless knowledge, the person is someone who is able to see a wider picture. Someone who is able to take advantage of the various resources of the Research Center and improve operating efficiency. I believe that Intern Jungwu Han is a man who has the potential to become a Generalist.”

In the midst of others speaking among themselves, Yoonseok made one final comment.

“Having this kind of talent be tied down to a single project for 2 to 3 years is a great loss to the Research Center. If we have the potential to produce an individual who not only is a Generalist but Specialist in every category, then shouldn't we make all efforts to do so as soon as possible?”

The Heads of Centers all nodded in agreement.

“So here is my proposal. We change Intern Jungwu Han's position to Regular Researcher, and then set the next 6 month as training period where he is to be sent to all the Centers to gather experience. Assigning him to a center afterwards won't pose a problem.”

Taesun looked convinced when he recalled something and asked,

“Is that possible under the current operating procedures?”

“That probably depends on the decision of the Chief. And Intern Jungwu Han has already been granted project subsidy, so if for nothing other than assigning him a Corporate card, he must become a Regular Researcher.”

“S... Subsidy?”

Yoonseok moved his gaze over to the Chief. The Chief smiled quietly and then turned on his mic.

“Procedure and Exception. What a good proposal riding the line

between the two extremes. I am always greatly impressed by Professor Shin's great wisdom."

Yoonseok became emboldened by the Chief's apparent consent. Yoonseok addressed the Heads of Centers.

"Please let your thoughts be heard if you have any comments."

Who would dare oppose a proposal set forth by one of the highest ranking seniors, one which the Chief himself had already given his permission to.

'I can't tell what those two are thinking at all.'

Jungwu finally breathed in relief after the result of the two hours or so of the Proposal Assessment was more or less decided, but he still could not find himself taking his eyes off of Yoonseok and Songu.

The Conference room was awkwardly silent once the assessment time was over. And as expected, the cleanup of the conference room after the fact was left to the youngest recruits of the Laboratory.

"So we are going to be called later this evening?"

"Manager Jun said on his way out that we will all probably end up in the Centers we have been aiming for."

Jungwu who had been straightening out the podium couldn't help but focus in on the conversation between Gitae and Sunghwan who had been organizing the chairs.

"Well after all that Jungwu ssi is going to go under another assessment."

"You're right. And sent to all the centers. Just what will he be made to do?"

But Jungwu didn't have the foggiest idea as to what would actually happen either. But if there was one good thing that came

out of this, it was that he was no longer being called an intern.

‘Wait. What is going to happen to my Internship contract?’

He resolved to ask later and refocused on cleaning up.

Around 4:30, the Conference room opened. Jungwu’s eyes opened wide when he saw the person entering the room.

“Doctor Moon?”

“Jungwu Han ssi.”

She had called him by name so he ran up towards the door.

“The conference for Personnel Evaluation has just completed. It has been agreed that it will begin next year on January 1st.”

“What will begin?”

“Being a Regular Researcher”

Jungwu was curious if Professor Yoonseok Shin’s proposal was accepted in the end.

“So what exactly will happen from this point onward?”

“For now it seems like you’ll be considered a regular researcher of Lab 1 in Central Research Laboratory, and you’ll be dispatched to the other Centers for projects. I’ve said this before, but Researchers who aren’t participating in a project spend most of their time like a freelancer.”

By ‘said before’, she seemed to be referring to the time she had spent all night explaining the runnings of the Laboratory on the day of the signing of the contract.

‘Although I don’t remember most of it.’

Jungwu asked about the internship contract as well. What he got in response was completely bureaucratic in nature.

“It’s detailed in the small print.”

“I see...”

“If there are no other issues I’ll be heading out then. I have business at the Hospital...”

“Ah, wait a moment please.”

Taking this opportunity when he had her before him, he decided to inquire about a recent change to his physiology.

“I can’t sleep at night for some reason. I sleep intermittently throughout the day whenever I find the time or sometimes just pass out. I feel like I have gotten Insomnia somehow, do you think this is due to the side effect? Sometimes I think it might be because of overwork though...”

In the middle of his speaking, Doctor Moon suddenly moved right up to Jungwu. Her nostrils were so close to his face that Jungwu instantly went rigid on the spot. From less than a palm’s distance away, Doctor Moon checked Jungwu’s eyes and the surrounding area of his face before responding.

“Now that you mention it, your face is showing remnants of the symptom.”

“Symptom?”

“Earlier stages of fatigue.”

She reached out with her hands and placed them on Jungwu’s wrists. She checked the second hand of her watch as she measured his pulse, assuming the image of a doctor checking on her patient perfectly.

‘She was going to diagnose me? I got tense for nothing.’

But then the sweet smell of Doctor Moon’s perfume wafted over to him, agitating his masculine instincts. Standing close enough to the beautiful woman to feel her gentle breath on him while she held onto his wrist, Jungwu could not help but feel his face redden at the unexpected contact with her.

“Excuse me, Doctor Moon. About my Pulse. It could be beating

faster for reasons that have nothing to do with the symptoms that you're thinking about."

Doctor Moon's eyes that exuded her intellect looked up at his.

"I'm taking that situation into account when I am testing."

"Eh? Taking what into account?"

Doctor Moon who had been wordlessly checking his pulse then said,

"It's normal."

She gave her diagnostics as a doctor who seemed extremely trustworthy.

"Then it must be because of the overtime, right?"

"No. That's also strange."

Jungwu found himself unable to resist her when she placed her thumb under his lower eyelids and naturally pulled them down because she had done it with such practiced doctor-like professionalism.

"Most normal adult men don't even complain with just this amount of overtime. You even had weekends off."

"Ah, that's what you mean?"*

In some ways, it was a terrifying diagnostic.

"Well, it doesn't hurt to run some tests. It's almost end of your shift, right? Please come down to the parking lot when you're done. We'll head to the hospital together."

Doctor Moon finished speaking her piece and immediately headed out of the Conference room.

'Today? Right after? She's so thorough. I guess it would be great if she could find the cause sooner than later.'

Jungwu turned around to finish organizing and cleaning up the podium and couldn't help but be surprised. The Temporary

Researchers had been watching him very closely from afar.

‘Mmm...’

More than getting the recognition of the Heads of Centers, more than Yoonseok’s proposal of special treatment, the Temporary Researchers watched Jungwu with far more envy at the fact that Doctor Moon was standing there holding his wrists. So Jungwu couldn’t help but grin.

There was a research lab inside AN General Hospital that was shared between AN Hospital’s Pharmacy Support Center and KG Chemical’s Pharmaceutical Center.

Jungwu was taking the same examination at the same place as a month ago when he had first come here as a human test subject. From Blood pressure, electrocardiogram, ultrasound, until blood sample. For about half an hour, Doctor Moon focused on the exams without sharing a word with him.

“We need to first see the result so please rest for a bit.”

Jungwu who had been pressing an alcohol swab over the arm the blood was drawn from then gave a big yawn.

“Doctor Moon, I’m so sleepy. I’ll take a nap on the chair until we get the results.”

“If you do that then the AN Hospital staff will not look upon you well.”

Irresistible drowsiness; he felt like he was about to faint at this rate.

“Then I’ll go to a chair outside...”

“Please wait. I’ll lend you a bed.”

Jungwu swallowed back a groan before the chaotic pile of sheets, random articles of clothing, and other unidentifiable personal items cluttering up a two-story bunk bed.

“Where are we?”

“Diagnostics and Overnight Room.”

Doctor Moon pointed not at the messy but neatly arranged bed on the opposite side.

“That side is my spot.”

“Doctor Moon’s spot?”

“There are a lot of times we need to stay overnight at the Pharmaceutical Center so I have asked for permissions from the doctors in this area ahead of time. Please go ahead and sleep for now. I’ll come back with the test results.”

“I don’t mind but...”

Jungwu fell asleep the moment he hit the bed.

An hour later.

Doctor Moon was sitting in front of an automatic Blood analyzer with the tag ‘XE-2106’.

She had been reading a book waiting for the results to print out when the door to the examination room opened and a late thirties man with a sizable face walked in.

“Eh? Miss Chaeun?”

“Hwichul Sunbae nim.”

A doctor wearing the name tag “Hwichul Yi” walked up to her with a welcoming smile.

“We were so busy we haven’t even seen each other in a while. Isn’t this the first since we met back in the fall?”

“I guess it is.”

“What were you up to here? Aren’t you normally confining yourself to the Pharmaceutical Center?”

“I had something to examine.”

The machine made a beeping noise and a receipt-sized paper came printing out. Doctor Moon who saw this then tilted her head.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“Result came back too normal”

“Healthy is always good.”

“But then it doesn’t explain the symptom.”

Hwichul looked at Doctor Moon with eyes filled with curiosity.

“Is it a rare symptom?”

“It’s insomnia.”

“Eey.”

Hwichul Yi’s interest evaporated, but he recalled something while watching her prepare to leave and said,

“Miss Chae...no... I should be calling you Doctor Moon now. It looks like you’re still waiting for Professor Ha to return. You won’t pick Residents, and it’s killing us with overwork.”

“Everyone knows torturing sunbae and company is the professor’s hobby. Isn’t it because of that?” replied Doctor Moon.

Hwichul brought his hands to his face and smacked his forehead.
“Ah, that must have been it.”

“I need to go share the result so I’ll be taking my leave.”

Hwichul made a serious look at her who was trying to leave and then said,

“And I too am certain that Doctor Moon is going to return someday. We’re Doctors, right? Fighting disease?”

Doctor Moon’s eyes showed nostalgia for but a moment before it disappeared.

“I don’t know why you made this choice, but good luck. I don’t have anything to say but this.”

Bebeep Bebeep

“I’m being paged. Man... I was hoping to skip out on the examination room. I’ll get going. Next time let’s eat together. With the three musketeers all together.”

“Ok, Sunbae.”

Hwichul left the Examination Room first.

Click

Chaeun looked at Jungwu who was fast asleep and oblivious to the world atop the bed of the Overnight room.

“Jungwu ssi?”

It was safe to say that he was deeply in sleep judging from his lack of reaction. In fact, it was probably correct to call it a ‘Deep Sleep’.

‘Should I let him sleep a bit more?’

She had brought IV pack with her because he had been making complaints, but she set it down on the desk. She took off the gown she had been wearing and placed it on the rack and entered the shower room next to the Overnight room.

Sshaa.

Chaeun reentered the room twenty minutes later while drying her hair with a towel. Sitting down, she picked up a book that had been on the desk. Jungwu was still sleeping.

And in the middle of her making her way through the Academic papers, the cellphone in her coat pocket began to vibrate.

She was worried it might disturb Jungwu’s sleep, so she took it out of the pocket and walked out of the room.

When she checked the screen she noticed an indication which showed that there was a one-way call pending. There was only one person who would use such a method to contact her.

“Yes, professor.”

-Oh, Doctor Moon. I’ve got your mail.

A bright and refreshing voice. It was Professor Seungook Chun.

-How was the guy today?

“As we expected. But then the Chief came in and...”

-Chief Son? He’s too good at sniffing things out. And no other issues?

Chaeun recalled the sight of Jungwu falling asleep as if passing out.

“It seems like Jungwu Han ssi is experiencing temporary Sleeping disorder, but all results came back normal. I think that I should refer him to a specialist for a proper checkup.”

-Do you really think you need to go that far?

“I think we should cover all bases.”

-He’s using unfamiliar perception again and again so he’s probably feeling disoriented. I think it’s the adaptation stage.

“You say he’s disoriented, but he looked like he was really enjoying it. He’s starting to act like you too.”

-Like me? Really?

There was a sound of laughter on the other end of the line.

-You said he was 26, right? Young and with my personality; What if Doctor Moon falls in love with him?

“Your jokes are improving by the day.”

-Doctor Moon is really the only person who responds to my sense of humor. So, is Research progressing smoothly?

Doctor Moon hesitated and did not answer.

-It’s a problem if a person strives perfection excessively. Try to let your emotions control you for once.

“Professor.”

-Hmm?

“What kind of world is Jungwu Han seeing?”

-Why ask? Are you sad you weren't the one?

Chaeun recalled Jungwu earlier who was able to point out things she hadn't yet considered during the presentations earlier today.

“I can't tell what kind of work you're expecting to do with this man.”

-The higher the grass the higher the entropy. Please continue to observe him with interest.

“Professor, when are you expecting to return...”

-I think I'll be in this neighborhood for about a month for now. Munich has such a great scenery. Let's speak again when I'm ready to relocate. Enjoy your holiday weekend. Hopefully, you'll find yourself a boyfriend~

-click—

Chaeun once again returned to the Overnight room.

She noticed Jungwu who had drifted off to sleep with his eyes closed, breathing in and out oblivious to the world.

‘Fall in love? I would love to have time for such things.’

Doctor Moon returned to the desk and resumed reading through the Academic Papers

Code: AF-12

Case: Adaptation Stage 1

Research: Subject experiencing temporary Drowsiness after using the Ability

Tea Lady: I think the easiest (unfortunately) is to imagine japanese tea ceremony. Super rigid, super formal. Imagine in that setting, there is a lady in tight kimono drinking tea, having

impeccable hair and makeup. That's the image being drawn. Korea has older tea culture, but japanese tea tradition is better known thanks to anime.